

What Role Does Humor in the Higher Education Classroom Play in Student-Perceived Instructor Effectiveness?

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WHAT ROLE DOES HUMOR IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION
CLASSROOM PLAY IN STUDENT-PERCEIVED
INSTRUCTOR EFFECTIVENESS?

by

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ABSTRACT

WHAT ROLE DOES HUMOR IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION CLASSROOM PLAY IN STUDENT-PERCEIVED INSTRUCTOR EFFECTIVENESS?

Stephen Paul Halula

Marquette University. 2013

Everyone has had college instructors who they thought were excellent and those who were not. In pondering what attributes might have made the difference between these groups, the idea of “humor” came to mind, setting the researcher on course to study the research question “What role does humor in the higher education classroom play in student-perceived instructor effectiveness?”

A qualitative approach to acquiring data was chosen. An entry-level history class led by a college instructor at a major Midwestern university known for his sense of humor was selected. Nine students were given a survey on instructor effectiveness; five of the survey respondents were chosen for a series of three, 30-45 minute interviews to discuss the research question topic, i.e., the role humor plays in the higher education classroom. The goal was to hear what students actually had to say about the importance of humor in their classrooms.

In reviewing the extant literature, it was found that many books and articles wrote about humor and education but were typically anecdotal and prescriptive in nature with little or no research backing. While studies about humor and education could be found, a large number of them were concerned with primary and secondary school settings. Of all the studies a very small number of these listened to the voice of the student. As a majority of the extant literature focused on a lecture-based, teacher-centric, large-classroom educational paradigm, this study chose that model as well as a basis for analysis to be able to be able to compare and contrast findings and data points with this literature.

A number of studies showed affirmatively the link between humor and education, pointing out that that humor helps create a learning-conducive environment helping students retain classroom subject matter, i.e., learn better.

The results of the survey and interviews aligned with a majority of the extant literature that humor did indeed play an important role in the efficacy of their instructors by creating this learning-conducive environment, where the atmosphere was less stressful, where questions could be asked without fear, and information would be better and longer retained.

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Stephen Paul Halula

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Chapter 1 Laughing and Learning?

"WHODUNIT?"

“Story problems”--two of the most feared words in algebra classes around the world! Just how was Mr. Halula going to get the class to avoid AA (Algebraic Anxiety), to say nothing about helping them understand how to solve such problems! As usual as the bell rang, Mr. Halula entered the room, only this time with a deerstalker (hat) on his head, wearing an Inverness cape, and carrying a magnifying glass. His “SH” initials today seemed to mean Sherlock Holmes. “In class today,” he said, “we are going to solve some mysteries!”

The rest of the hour was spent solving (or attempting to solve) very short vignettes from a book entitled “Minute Mysteries.” By the end of the hour, with more laughing than usual occurring, the class became more adept at identifying the “crime, clues, and guilty party;” they also enjoyed the often humorous missteps taken by class members attempting to become amateur sleuths.

The next day’s assignment was to write one’s own minute mystery, which that day proved to be somewhat humorous at times but often impressive as well. THEN, one day later, began the dreaded first class on story problems; amazingly enough, most students successfully looked at the story problems as mysteries waiting to be solved and applied the sleuthing techniques they had seen the day before such as determining what is the context, what is happening, what do I know and what do I need to find out. They even demonstrated the ability to ferret out “red herring” pieces of data not germane to the

solving of the problem which oftentimes can distract the student in solving such problems.

Humor in the classroom?

Can taking a light-hearted, humor-linked approach to classroom instruction help create an environment in which the students feel that they can learn more and consequently feel that their teachers are more successful? More specifically, what impact does humor have on learning and retention of information? These questions are addressed both in the literature review and the study data.

The purpose of this study was to determine how humor might be useful in making a more student-centric, learning-conducive environment for the student and ultimately making the instructor more effective in the eyes of the student.

I found two common concepts in the extant literature; the first was the positive impact that a caring classroom environment is believed to have on learning. The second was how humor can help create such a caring environment. While not specifically connected in the literature, one could syllogistically put these concepts together then, that humor can create a caring, classroom environment which ultimately has a positive impact on student learning.

A study that started me down this path was conducted by Pedde (1996). She discusses the relationship between a caring classroom and how students become more engaged, ultimately improving the learning process. Pedde continues to build a case showing the link between a classroom with humor and a caring and learning environment. While the domain for her study was the middle-school (and I focused on

higher education), her research helped nudge me into the potential humor-caring-learning relationship.

In looking at this study from 1996 by Kathleen Pedde in more depth, we find that she examined the use of humor in middle school classrooms as the subject of her master's thesis. At various points of her thesis, Pedde does make some far-reaching statements that did not seem to be specifically supported by her study. An example would be "Humor, an important tool, can be used in any classroom by any teacher of any subject for the benefit of any student, no matter the age level, subject matter or ethnic background." (Pedde, 1996, p. 5)

Nevertheless, this document was useful to me and did have conclusions meaningful (to me) that were indeed supported by her data. This study involved 64 students and four teachers in an urban school setting where observations were made; Pedde did not offer how these participants were chosen. The students and teachers were surveyed and interviewed to discover what they considered to be the effects of humor in their classrooms. This was a school in an ethnically and economically diverse community with a transient nature thrown in due to several students with a parent in the armed forces. The school itself was near a nude dance club, grocery store, strip mall (no pun intended) and in an area with some gang and drug activity. Viewing through an ethnic lens, the area had a Hispanic, African-American, Asian-American and Caucasian makeup with some of the population possibly being considered to be financially comfortable.

To begin with, Pedde defined humor to be "an action, event, verbal statement or exchange that produces or attempts to produce laughter." (Pedde, 1996, p. 7) She continues to define laughter as "the vocalization that is often the result of the use of

humor." (Pedde, 1996, p. 7) (While definitions are covered in more detail later in this document, I feel it is important to provide Pedde's definition to help build the proper context).

Pedde systematically observed four classrooms over a period of two days per class, interviewing the related teachers as to their "intent, purpose and awareness of their use of humor." (Pedde, 1996, p. 9) The students to whom humor was directed were also interviewed primarily to see if their reaction was the same as intended by their teacher. These student interviews were somewhat more informal than the teacher interviews where the students were asked about the use of humor and how it made them feel. (Pedde, 1996, p. 35)

The student interviews showed that a majority of the students felt more comfortable in a classroom with a teacher who uses humor and learned more from these teachers using humor. Pedde continued to cite the relief theory of humor (discussed later in detail) that humor was successful in these classrooms because humor can "'break the ice' in a (classroom) setting (and that) stress and anxiety are reduced and the class becomes a more open learning environment." (Pedde, 1996, p 18)

All in all she found humor "to be beneficial to establishing caring relationships between teachers and students. Such relationships were found to be critical to the engagement of students in the classroom and therefore to also benefit students in their learning." (Pedde, 1996, p. iii) Using her study, the classroom with humor being used as a tool can successfully have a caring and learning atmosphere.

This classroom environment would not just be having a "safe haven" at school. This is an atmosphere different from Alisa Harris (2010) in quoting the CEO of a charter school corporation in Los Angeles,

Kids were just looking behind their shoulders, they just didn't feel safe. There was a very toxic atmosphere...Even when you had some heroes among the teaching staff who really tried to make a difference it really wasn't enough to change the entire culture. (Harris, 2010, p. 46)

No, this is making the classroom a place where the students can feel they are safe but also a place where they can learn: a place where they want to learn. This would be the classroom in which the student is engaged and cared for.

The reader might be wondering just how the term "humor" is defined. As a partial response I found that "What 'humor' means?" to be more elusive than I had expected. Not only is there not a consensus of how humor can be or is defined, much of the literature which I read offered no definition, with these authors relying on the a priori knowledge/opinion of what their readers would consider humor to be. Some authors did offer single definitions, while others offered multiple definitions; some of these definitions were also circular relying on "laughing" for part of the definition of humor, and then defining "humor" using the term laughter.

I would ask the reader to use his/her own "definition" of the term until I return to this topic later as I do believe this is a key concept. Please note that I pursue how "humor" is treated in the extant literature as well as its meaning for the participants in my study to follow.

Fun, laughter, motivation and learning?

Angela Valenzuela (1999) wrote *Subtractive Schooling*, a three-year study of a Houston area high school using both quantitative (surveys/questionnaires and analyzing records of the school district) and qualitative (observations and interviews) approaches. During this study, she developed the trust and confidence of students in the school comprised mainly of Mexican and Mexican-American students; it was this trust that helped her ferret out many of the dynamics of the school. Valenzuela (1999) discussed how immigrant students regardless of gender or track placement saw their teachers as being more caring and accessible. This was not the case in general for second- and third-generation (as opposed to immigrant) students. She proposes that "an authentically caring pedagogy would not only cease subtracting students' cultural identities, it would also reverse its effects" (p. 266) and that both immigrant and second- and third-generation students would see teachers as more caring and ultimately be in a better learning environment. Can teachers be more successful by building a meaningful and caring relationship with the students? In what ways might humor function as a tool to utilize to help build such a caring environment?

In listening to the voices of Valenzuela's (1999) informants, the following comments by a number of students seemed to reiterate this caring relationship theme:

Ms. Novak is the best teacher I ever had. The way she laughs at us makes us happy, you know like she *really* likes us. I learn easier that way. (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 101)

Ms. Aranda is the best teacher I had. I never got bored in her class. And I learned so much. (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 101)

In response to a question about whether there were any classes that interested them...they described the teachers...as making the classes fun and interesting. (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 234)

No...if they (teachers) really cared, they wouldn't be boring and they would show in other ways, too, that they cared. (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 235)

“Learning easier,” “never got bored,” “fun and interesting” and “not boring” equals caring –what do that mean? First of all, I contend that this mentioning of fun and laughing implies the use of humor. It would not seem to be a leap of faith to assume that a classroom with humor might be the "fun" classroom and I believe that Valenzuela's work points us in this direction.

One might respond that "fun" is different than caring, but the study by Pedde mentioned above determined that there is a relationship between a classroom with humor and a caring classroom. Thus, whether "fun" or not, the classroom with humor would typically be a caring classroom.

Her study further pointed out how a caring classroom gets students engaged, ultimately creating a beneficial result for learning. While one could possibly have a caring classroom atmosphere without fun, and a fun classroom without humor, Pedde points out that using humor provides a caring classroom, which one could then infer would be a fun classroom as well.

Continuing with this thought, in a recent article, one reads "The way we teach our children history has undermined our chances for success." It continues pointing out that a leading Harvard historian and NEWSWEEK columnist presented ways to make it fun and a better classroom. (Ferguson, 2011. p. 62)

One can infer from Ferguson that fun in the classroom will improve our chance for success (at least in history---but why limit it to social studies.)

In a similar vein, the students in the Valenzuela book associate liking school and being motivated to learn. This seems to be echoed later in an article by Samuelson (2010)

when he writes: "Motivation has weakened because more students (of all races and economic classes let it be added [Samuelson's words]) don't like school, don't work hard, and don't do well." (Samuelson 2010, p. 2) Students who are not motivated will not do as well. So, while motivation is not all that is needed in the classroom, Mr. Samuelson does feel it plays a big role in classroom success since not motivating the students is, in his opinion, resulting in the failure of school reform.

One can argue that the caring, learning atmosphere created by the use of humor, also is a motivated student environment; that being said, I don't ascribe to such a simplistic reason for "school failure" (or that schools are necessarily "failing" for that matter). I would further suggest that the concept of students needing to "like school" can be problematic on its own; however, what might the connection be between a teacher's use of humor, the resulting student motivation and how the student perceives the instructor's success (where this "success" might be defined as where students learn, not merely "having fun" or "liking school" or liking the teacher personally?) The Irish poet William Butler Yeats wrote that "education is not the filling of a pot, but the lighting of a fire." (Pritchard, 2008, p. 1) Instructors need to focus on motivating their students, lighting the fire initially and keeping the flame burning as well.

Consequently, one could reasonably, (returning to and) building on Pedde (1996), defend the case that fun and laughing (and "not boring") can be linked to humor, and be associated with a caring environment and ultimately engaged, successfully learning students. This caring environment makes learning easier and more successful and ultimately improves the efficacy of the teacher/instructor in the eyes of the student.

Along with Pedde, I believe that humor in the classroom can create a caring and engaging environment, which will help motivate the student to learn and ultimately consider the instructor to be successful or efficient; the connections between humor, a caring and engaging environment and instructor efficacy were the focus of my study.

Engaging and motivating students through the use of humor

By now, the reader can see my contention that humor has an important role in the classroom and can be used as a tool to provide an enjoyable, non-boring successful learning environment. I can recollect in my pre-service teacher preparation program, seeing humor mentioned in one teaching methods book almost as an afterthought, as a form of classroom motivation mixed in with several other techniques of motivation also listed at the same time. This was a fruit cocktail, if you will, of approaches where all looked different, but "tasted" the same. I could not even find a single mention of "humor" in Ken Bain's (2004) "What the Best College Teachers Do." I suppose my surprise was again based on my personal expectation that a necessary arrow in a "best college teacher's" quiver would be humor. That was not the case. The topic of what has been published and discussed regarding humor and education is addressed in much more detail in the literature review section below.

In another study, Buckman (2010) selected ten professors known as performers and having a reputation of using humor in their classrooms. Buckman uses the term "performer" as the professors whom she chose were known for a presentation style which often had a dramatic flair utilizing "techniques that often reflect theatrical styles or approaches that make them feel like performers." (p. iv) Some of her informants considered teaching to be a performance to the extent that they "identified their classes as

'the audience,' their learning tools as 'props', and their behaviors as 'just like a stand-up comedian.'" (p. 133)

Of particular interest was the definition of humor which Buckman presented that humor is "anything that people say or do that is perceived as funny and tends to make others laugh, as well as the mental processes that go into both creating and perceiving such an amusing stimulus and the affective response involved in the enjoyment of it." (p. 9)

Through a series of interviews Buckman inferred that these professors had humor as a part of their basic nature and identity. As a result of using this humor, they seemed to create a student-centered learning environment keeping the subjects which they taught "fresh and fun." Perhaps having humor as part of my own nature and identity is why I feel so strongly about its usefulness in the classroom. Buckman discovered that in general using humor that was student-centered without being student-deprecating worked well for this group. Members of this group also avoided what they considered to be inappropriate humor, avoiding sensitive topics such as sex, religion, and race and avoiding the use of bad language as well.

From a personal standpoint, humor has been the way that I have been able to endure the "downs" of the "ups and downs" of life--thus, my belief in the importance of humor in the classroom. The source of own my sense of humor (or lack thereof depending upon who is judging) may be genetic, manifesting itself at an early age, as I have been told that whenever my mother was transporting me by stroller in the city, I would reach out for every adult male (regardless of actual age, race, or dress) and yell

“Daddy!” the more “upset” my mother became, the more passionately I would yell “Daddy!” and then laugh more each time.

I have a first cousin, Wes Halula, who is owner/producer/director/writer for HappyFunTime located in the Los Angeles area. HappyFunTime is a full-service production house, known for (according to the HappyFunTime website) "taking complex, heady content and turning it into something hilarious, insightful, emotional and memorable." (<http://happyfuntime.com/>) So, comedy is definitely part of the Halula clan's makeup.

The source of my sense of humor may be environmental as well. A day after my mother had a malignant brain tumor removed, she smiled weakly at us and said, in somber voice that matched her bandaged presentation from her hospital bed, “I’m afraid they removed my brain and left the tumor!” (This comment was then followed by an albeit weak, big smile.)

When the times seem the bleakest (losing my job, finding out that I had an unanticipated, additional six months of wearing a cast, and others) it has been my humor (along with my religion and family) that has kept me going.

As a math teacher/instructor, (high school and university night school,) I found that humor interspersed during the classroom helps keep things rolling. I have similarly found in the business world that humor can level the playing field, take the edge off negotiations and make a presentation more enjoyable for both the audience and the presenter.

Am I on the right track in my assumption regarding humor being needed or at least useful as a tool for the teacher to be effective in the student's eyes? When does a

teacher become a stand-up comic and lose sight of his/her educational goal? Can humor be dispensed in the classroom only by those instructors with an innate bend toward humor? What role in class humor does the student play? When is (attempts at) humor inappropriate? Is there a one-size-fits-all approach to humor that would work for all (humorous and non-humorous) professors, instructors, and teachers? Are there different types of humor? Can a teacher try to be too funny to the point where he/she is no longer viewed by the students as an education professional? What does the term “humor” really mean? Does it mean the same to everyone?

While this list of questions could be considered to cover far too much territory to address in a single, focused study, in my mind they are components of if/how the instructor is successful in the opinion of the student. The central, underlying questions are: 1. what is humor? and 2. Can the use of humor make us better teachers in the eyes of our students? This research project is a first step on the journey to seeking the answer through the opinions of others and extant literature. Admittedly, I also needed to keep my personal “humor in the classroom is a good thing” bias in check and not let this predisposition distort my interpretation of data collected from my informants, as they are the center of my inquiry, i.e., the students' perception regarding the efficacy of their professor and what is humor.

Research Question

After having spent much time pondering the concepts which I have illustrated thus far, I chose as my research question:

What role does student-determined humor in the higher education classroom play in student-perceived instructor effectiveness?

As I stated above, I believe that humor helps make the student feel more motivated to learn. I base this in part on personal experience having used humor in the classroom as a teacher and having been exposed to the use of humor in the classroom as a student. It was interesting to see how the voices of the informants aligned with my perception.

Definition of Terms

Humor

Jonas (2004, p. 11) notes that “the definition of humor has several variables. It can hit different people in different ways, depending on the circumstances.” He continues that

In the movie *Little Big Man*, the Native American grandfather, played by Chief Dan George, determines it is a good day to die. He makes his arrangements, calls for his buffalo robes, goes out onto the prairie, lies down, and waits. Time passes; it begins to rain. Another character mournfully comes to check on him and discovers Grandfather is still alive. Chief Dan George arises with great dignity, gathers his belongings, and says to his companion, "Sometime the magic happens, sometimes it doesn't." It is the same with humor. (Jonas, 2004, p. 21)

Loomans writes:

There are two very distinct sides of the humor coin: the comic and the tragic. Humor can act as a social lubricant or social retardant in the educational setting. It can educate or denigrate, heal or harm, embrace or deface. It's a powerful communication tool, no matter which side is chosen. (Loomans, 1993, p. 14)

As I began my research, I expected that I would find a single definition used by everyone or at least by a majority; that was not the case. Having two master's degrees in abstract mathematics, I had learned to build logical systems based on defined terms;

however, in rethinking about my system building days, there were always UNdefined terms used as building blocks as well. Concepts such as point, line and plane in geometry and the concepts of element and set were not defined yet useful in building logical systems; but, do I want to leave the term "humor" undefined? I attempt to unpack how the extant literature handles the term humor later in the literature review.

Instructor Effectiveness

As for the term "instructor effectiveness," that in itself would be a topic for a series of books; even the author of "What the Best College Teachers Do" had difficulty defining what "best" meant, which one might extrapolate to be closely related to "effective." It does seem to be somewhat problematic, almost ironic, when a book about "best" teachers never defines the term "best."

Garner notes similar to what Valenzuela's students vocalized, "Effective college teachers were often described as 'enthusiastic' and those who use humor in their instruction were rated more highly." (Garner, 2005, p. 2) Quoting Bergen (1992)) St. Pierre (2001) points out the "lack of consensus within the literature on the relevant characteristics of successful teachers." (St. Pierre, 2001, p. 24)

For my research purposes my defining the concept of instructor effectiveness was not germane for I was seeking how the use of humor resonates for the student and how the student responds in considering whether or not the instructor is effective; the definitions of "humor" and "effectiveness" are theirs. I compared and contrasted the informant definitions with those from the extant literature which follows.

Chapter 2 Laughter and Learning in Literature

Having chosen higher education, in my review of the extant literature I found a large number of the studies dealt with humor and education at the elementary and secondary level. That was not necessarily a bad thing as the Pedde (1996) study did help point me in the right direction. It should also be noted up front that I found no information using the voice of the student when it came to the perceived success of the student's instructor. As the university student may have a better appreciation for what helps them learn as they will have had over twelve years in the education system, this student voice becomes worthy of hearing and study. It is also important to determine what the student voice has to say regarding what humor is.

Working with the opinions of informants in higher education across gender, social class and race was interesting in a number of ways. My research started with the goal to seek out the similarities and differences across the various groups as well as the individual students themselves. Unfortunately, due to the lack of diversity across gender, class and race with my informants, I was not able to undertake such an analysis. Thus, such an analysis must await future research.

I had foreseen no shortage of literature with respect to the topic of humor but I had expected that publications about humor and its relationship to education would be difficult to find. As I dug deeper, there were no real surprises in my literature search as there were indeed a number of books, articles, dissertations, and other publications on humor. I was somewhat surprised, however, that most of the documents linking humor and education were relatively recent in nature, i.e., from the late 1990's and thereafter. I further found that a majority of the extant literature focused on a lecture-based, teacher-

centric, large-classroom educational paradigm. Noting this, I also chose this model as a basis for my study. I later raise some questions, however, concerning the need to examine the impact of humor in other instructional configurations (e.g., smaller classes, seminars, or on-line.)

The results of my literature research grouped naturally into three areas each of which will be discussed in turn:

1. (Continuing to seek THE/A) Definition of Humor,
2. General (non-study) Literature about Humor and Education and
3. Studies about Humor and Education

Why did I feel that continuing to search for a definition of humor was important when I plan on seeking what the informant believes humor to be? First of all, as I read through the articles, studies and books, a key to understanding what is being presented is having a grasp of the concepts being used and the subtleties and nuances that converge in the author's message.

Much like the blind men describing the elephant (grab the tail and it's snakelike, touch a leg and it's a strong and sturdy creature), we need to have our "eyes wide open" (pun intended) in order to focus on the tapestry (and the message) that the author is weaving. While it might be tempting to consolidate a number of such documents, one needs to be ever vigilant in this action for if the definitions are too different, unsound inferences could be drawn. Another point to consider in a search for a definition is to see the similarities or common traits across the definitions.

In moving to the topic of humor and education in general, I found that there was a plethora of books, articles and so on making statements about the utility of humor in the

classroom, but, other than opinions, experiences or ideas not linked to specific studies or references, on their own they were standing on a weak (support) foundation.

Finally, the third of the list of three is looking at actual studies that are applicable for or related to my research question. Also to be considered is how my research question and area of study will complement and not merely replicate previous efforts.

1. (Continuing to Seek **the/A**) Definition of Humor

Boverie (1990) notes that it is difficult to define humor, but then quotes Davis and Farina (1970) that humor consists of multiple and no single behaviors and to explain any of these facets individually would come up short defining the term “humor” itself. The more I read, the concept of humor was so subjective that no universal definition was forthcoming; the various "theories" of humor, including relief, superiority and incongruity (discussed in detail below) had their own views of humor and in the case of relief theory did not even propose a definition.

As I continued looking at the various definitions of humor, or documents offering no such definition, I found that the Bible discusses humor (mirth) in Ecclesiastes 8:15 stating “Then I commended mirth because a man hath no better thing under the sun than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry.” A question that would come to mind would be whether "merry" involves humor and laughing, and moving one step further does laughing require humor--all topics on which I continued to seek more details.

While such well-respected books such as the Bible have high opinions of humor, this positive opinion of humor was not held by everyone. Cornett (1986, p. 19) writes that the Pilgrim Fathers believed laughter (and humor) to be a “low form of behavior.”

As noted above, Pedde defines humor to be "an action, event, verbal statement or exchange that produces, or attempts to produce, laughter" where "laughter is the vocalization that is often the result of humor." (Pedde, 1996, p. 7) These definitions are definitely circular in nature with humor being linked to laughter and laughter being linked to humor as each is defined, almost a "chicken or the egg" conundrum. Such difficulties persisted in my search for a definition of humor.

But, one can always turn to the dictionary to find a definition. The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines humor as:

1 *a*: a normal functioning bodily semifluid or fluid (as the blood or lymph) *b*: a secretion as a hormone) that is an excitant of activity

2 *a*: *in medieval physiology* : a fluid or juice of an animal or plant; *specifically*: one of the four fluids entering into the constitution of the body and determining by their relative proportions a person's health and temperament *b* : characteristic or habitual disposition or bent : TEMPERAMENT <of cheerful *humor*> *c* : an often temporary state of mind imposed especially by circumstances <was in no *humor* to listen> *d* : a sudden, unpredictable, or unreasoning inclination : WHIM <the uncertain *humors* of nature>

3 *a*: that quality which appeals to a sense of the ludicrous or absurdly incongruous *b*: the mental faculty of discovering, expressing, or appreciating the ludicrous or absurdly incongruous *c*: something that is or is designed to be comical or amusing — **out of humor**: out of sorts

This dictionary definition does indeed cover many views of humor, from physiology (current day to medieval) to what is more of the mainstream notion. Yet, this mainstream attempt seemed to come up short for me for does humor require something to be ludicrous or absurd? The statement "something that is or is designed to be comical or amusing" also seemed to come up short.

Continuing on with my search, as previously stated, I have found no consensus regarding the definition of "humor" in my review of the literature. In fact,

most of the books do not even attempt to define the concept. Huss (2007) offers no definition of humor when discussing the use of humor in the middle school, referring to humor as a "communicative attitude." (Huss, 2007, p. 1)

It needs to be pointed out here that omitting a definition of humor in the books and articles I accessed is not the same as leaving it undefined (as in mathematics), which is a purposeful, deliberate and announced activity.

It is easy to see that my search for something as simple as a definition of "humor" was not an easy one; however, Morreall (1983, p. 1) reminds us that "In the first century, the Roman Quintilian complained that no one had yet explained what laughter is, though many had tried." To avoid such a quandary, many authors of my research documents did not even attempt to answer this seemingly centuries-old unanswered question.

Aboudan describes humor as referring to "simple humoristic remarks that naturally occur in the communicative teaching of a second language." (Aboudan, 2009, p. 2) While coming from the context of the act of teaching a second language (discussed later), again we end up in a loop defining humor nearly in terms of itself, i.e., "humorous" and only within the realm of teaching a second language.

My findings or search for information seemed to reinforce that finding a definition of "humor" is problematic: some authors offer no such definition, some writers define the term poorly (e.g. a circuitous definition), and other researchers present a more concise definition but while more concise, there is still no consensus. Humor, like art or taste, is a personal, subjective thing.

Buckman defines humor as "anything that people say or do that is perceived as funny and tends to make others laugh, as well as the mental processes that go into both

creating and perceiving such an amusing stimulus and the affective response involved in the enjoyment of it." (Buckman, 2010, p. 9)

Without delving too deeply in traversing from humor to "being funny", a famous home-spun philosopher, Will Rogers is quoted by Loomans (1993, p. 14) that "Everything is funny as long as it is happening to somebody else." With respect to being honest with humor, Louvish (2007, p. 13) quotes another philosopher invoking a quest for truth and honesty in humor, quoting Marx that "The secret of life is honesty and fair dealing. If you can fake that, you've got it made." In the spirit of full disclosure, the Marx that was quoted was Groucho not Karl!

So far I believe the reader would agree that there is much more to humor than one might initially expect, especially when it comes to defining the concept; like the many views of the blind men in describing based on touch what an elephant looks like, there are many approaches to defining humor. As I proceeded to look at descriptions and definitions of humor, I found a number using the term "laughter."

Is Humor Laughter? Is Laughter Humor? How Are They Related?

Several authors (Sheppard (2002), Williams (2001), and Buckman (2010)) define humor as the action that makes people laugh or that is seen as being funny or amusing. This definition seemed to be more in line with what I would consider humor to be, but something seemed to be missing that seemed hard to determine; my search continued.

Buckman (2010, p. 9) continues to add to the definition the concept of "mental processes that go into both creating and perceiving such an amusing stimulus and the affective response involved in the enjoyment of it." While Buckman's definition was non-circular, like many definitions I encountered, laughter was invoked or referred to in the

definition. Bostina-Bratu (2007) when discussing humor and laughter nearly treats the terms as synonyms. Smuts in the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* states "The philosophical study of humor has been focused on the development of a satisfactory definition of humor, which until recently has been treated as roughly co-extensive with laughter." (Smuts, 2009, p. 1) This source continues quoting John Dewey's opinion that "The laugh is by no means to be viewed from the standpoint of humor; its connection with humor is only secondary. It marks the ending ... of a period of suspense, or expectation, all ending which is sharp and secondary." (Smuts, 2009, p. 1)

Going further, this encyclopedia makes this distinction: laughter results from a pleasant psychological shift, whereas, humor arises from a pleasant cognitive shift. This did pique my interest and seemed to link humor to thinking/learning, but it seemed to also too severely segregate humor and laughter which many sources use synonymously.

Another proclamation found is that "Laughter is not primarily about humor but about social relationships." (Provine, 2000, p. 61) Bostina-Bratu writes "Laughter is, first and foremost, a social signal--it disappears when there is no audience, which may be small as one other person--and it binds people together ... Laughter establishes--or restores--a positive emotional climate and a sense of connection between people."

(Bostina-Bratu, 2007, p. 1)

While referring to laughter as a "social signal" or linked to "social relationships," the delineation between humor and laughter remained gray at best. I would disagree with the author that laughter cannot occur without an audience, recollecting reading something or remembering a situation and laughing by myself. Does that make me some type of "laugh-aholic?"

While the citations above show a connection between humor and laughter as well as some difference between them, the humor/laughter relationship is noted and was useful as I continued to look for a better definition on which to build my own.

Some of the Philosophical Theories of Humor-How Do They View Humor?

In digging deeper into the concept of humor, the extant literature, such as the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Morreall (1983) and others, presents various philosophical theories of humor. While there have been a number of these theories of humor, three main theories continued to surface: superiority, incongruity and relief theories. How might each of these theories define "humor?"

In considering the different theories, I read "While the task of defining humor is a seemingly simple one, it has proven quite difficult. Each theory attempts to provide a characterization of what is at least at the core of humor. However, these theories are not necessarily competing; they may be seen as simply focusing on different aspects of humor, treating certain aspects as more fundamental than others." (Smuts, 2009, p. 1) Taking this citation to heart, it behooved me to touch upon these theories and my thoughts about them. By reviewing these theories, I found differing views of what constitutes "humor."

The Superiority Theory of Humor

A definition of laughter to a proponent of this superiority theory of humor would be "an expression of a person's feelings of superiority over other people." (Morreall, 1983, p. 4) Continuing on this line of thought, Thomas Hobbes was quoted by the encyclopedia that "humor arises from a 'sudden glory' felt when we recognize our

supremacy over others." (Smuts, 2009, p. 3) Hobbes, along with Plato and Aristotle thought that humor fed on aggressive feeling resulting in this sense of superiority. This is the oldest and debatably the most widespread theory of laughter. As an explanation of humor using this theory, Plato wrote that "What makes a person laughable...is self-ignorance." (Morreall, 1983, p.4)

Does this theory accommodate all forms of humor and laughter? I think not as there are too many examples of laughter associated with humor and "non-humor" that do not relate to feelings of superiority. Such examples might include tickling someone (a child or even an adult) which would/could result in a laugh not linked to superiority. In seeming to concur with this opinion that laughter need not be in a superiority vein, Voltaire stated "Laughter always arises from a gaiety of disposition, absolutely incompatible with contempt and indignation." (Morreall, 1983, p. 8)

So while we found a definition of humor, since the theory does not generalize across all laughter, the search continued to the incongruity theory; moreover, I felt there was much more to humor than a feeling of superiority over others, and furthermore such a concept of humor would truly have difficulties in creating a caring environment.

The Incongruity Theory of Humor

A definition of humor to the follower of the incongruity theory of humor might be "an intellectual reaction to something that is unexpected, illogical, or inappropriate in some other way" (Morreall, 1983, p. 15) Morreall continues to contextualize this theory by pointing out that "We live in an orderly world, where we have come to expect certain patterns among things, their properties, events, etc. We laugh when we experience something that doesn't fit into these patterns." (Morreall, 1983, pp. 15-16)

In comparing this theory to the superiority theory of humor, "there is a certain duality or contrast that triggers laughter, but the superiority theory makes the overly restricted claim that this duality must be between the laugher's evaluation of his own importance and his evaluation of someone else's importance" unlike humor as defined above for this theory while the "incongruity theory ... though it does not deny that feelings of superiority may be involved in laughter, it does not see the duality in laughter as necessarily taking the form of a contrast between the laugher's sense of importance and his evaluation of someone else." (Morreall, 1983, p 15)

This theory has been supported by such renowned figures such as Immanuel Kant, Soren Kierkegaard, possibly finding its roots in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. "Primarily focusing on the object of humor, this school sees humor as a response to an incongruity, a term broadly used to include ambiguity, logical impossibility, irrelevance and inappropriateness." (Smuts, 2009, p. 1) This theory has such a large number of supporters as it seems to account for most cases of perceived funniness, which is partly because "incongruity" is something of an umbrella term." (Smuts, 2009, p. 3)

Aristotle supposedly thought the best way to make an audience laugh was to "set up an expectation and deliver something 'that gives a twist.'" (Smuts, 2009) Regardless of whether Aristotle as a "set-up" man, it seemed to me (and as noted above) the term incongruity was vague enough to apply to a number of situations, and while it may give humor additional depth, a well-articulated definition did not seem to be forthcoming.

Plato, according to Morreall (1983, p. 99), believed that reacting to humorous incongruity was against our nature—something unnatural. It does seem that the Greek philosophers were not of a single mind, for, as we read in Mitchell (2005, p. 1) that

Aristotle believed “There is a foolish corner in the brain of the wisest man.” In a more negative view again, another well-known philosopher, Santayana speaks of an “undertone of disgust' that mingles with amusement at humor.” (Morreall, 1983, p. 99)

In considering the universality of the incongruity theory of humor, we can see that every instance of incongruity does not trigger laughter or be considered humorous. An example might be for me to reach into my lunch sack and find a rattlesnake. This would be definitely incongruous but not humorous--to me a least! Hence, the incongruity theory did not universally address humor.

The Relief Theory of Humor

Those ascribing to the relief theory would define, at least partially, humor as being a venting of nervous energy. "While the superiority theory focuses on emotions involved in laughter, and the incongruity theory on objects or ideas causing laughter, the relief theory addresses...why does laughter take the physical form it does, and what is its biological function." (Morreall, 1983, p. 20) In a sense, this theory is more of a different way of looking at laughter than the other theories and could co-exist with either.

Notables such as Sigmund Freud and Herbert Spencer are typically associated with this theory. This group "saw humor as fundamentally a way to release energy generated by repression (Smuts, 2009, p. 1) Members of this school of thought, rather than truly defining humor, choose to point out important or necessary characteristics of humor and "the essential structures and psychological processes that produce laughter." (Smuts, 2009, p. 3) Those who ascribe to this relief theory seem to have difficulties distinguishing between humorous and non-humorous laughter. Here we end up with no definition of humor and a return to linking laughter to humor.

Hill (1998, p. 6) points out that Freud in *Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious* “related sense of humor to different stages of psychosexual development” such as children laughing about taboo topics such as sex and other bodily functions not typically discussed in mixed company. There was no surprise here.

In looking back at the superiority, incongruity and relief theories, again I did not find a universal definition of humor, due in part to each of the theories not addressing all aspects of humor.

Still No Definition of Humor? Possible Reasons?

Thus far we have seen Biblical references, a study, dictionary and "encyclopedia" definitions, been looking through a historical perspective, introduced to the concept of laughter and its relationship to humor and three philosophical views of humor, but still no "suitable" definition.

Our lack of success in finding a definition seemed to be reiterated when we read "It is rare to find a philosophical topic that bears such direct relevance to our daily lives, our social interactions, and our nature as humans." (Smuts, 2009, p. 1) Why do we continue to have such difficulty finding the meaning of humor? The encyclopedia states "Almost every major figure in the history of philosophy has proposed a theory, but after 2500 years there has been little consensus about what constitutes humor" (Smuts, 2009)

One reason for no such definition, is that there "are only a few philosophers currently focused on humor-related research, which is most likely due to two factors: the problems in the field have proved incredibly difficult, inviting repeated failures, and the subject is erroneously dismissed as an insignificant concern." (Smuts, 2009, p. 1) One could say, I suppose, that philosophers are just not taking humor seriously!

Another reason for the lack of a definition might be the subjective and cognitive nature of humor. Cornett, for example, writes "Today definitions of humor focus mainly on cognitive aspects of what makes us laugh (language play and unlikely visual and auditory images. Yet remaining with us is the idea of humor as something that is ludicrous, incongruous, abnormal, and out-of-the-ordinary." (Cornett, 1986, p, 24)

How can one come up with a definition for such an abstract, subjective and personal concept?

What Is A **Sense** Of Humor? Can There Be A Definition Of Humor?

Lundberg (2002, p. 7) states that "Humor is very personal. What individuals find humorous varies greatly from one person to another—so much so, in fact, that it often amazes us."

Humor is personal! We often hear and read about having a "sense of humor." Garner points out that "As with any sense, however such as taste or smell--individuals may have differing levels of receptivity; similarly, humor can be highly personal, contextual and subjective." (Garner, 2005, p. 1) Can one universally define what art is and what is not art? Does one's "taste" in music have to be the same for others? Salty-tasting food to some is normal-tasting food to others.

Mitchell (2005) writes that humor is different for different individuals; we all don't laugh at the same things, again linking "laughing" to "humor" but still not providing a definition. By taking a similar approach to St. Pierre (2001, p. 1) who states that it is a "term difficult to precisely define, but still possible to examine its effects"

Hence, the definitions of humor and teacher effectiveness of each the informants were more important in my study. The terms "student-determined" and "student-

perceived” in my research question “What role does student-determined humor in the higher education classroom play in student-perceived instructor effectiveness?” echoed this importance. How did the extant literature handle the concept of humor and its link to education?

2. General (non-study) Literature about Humor and Education

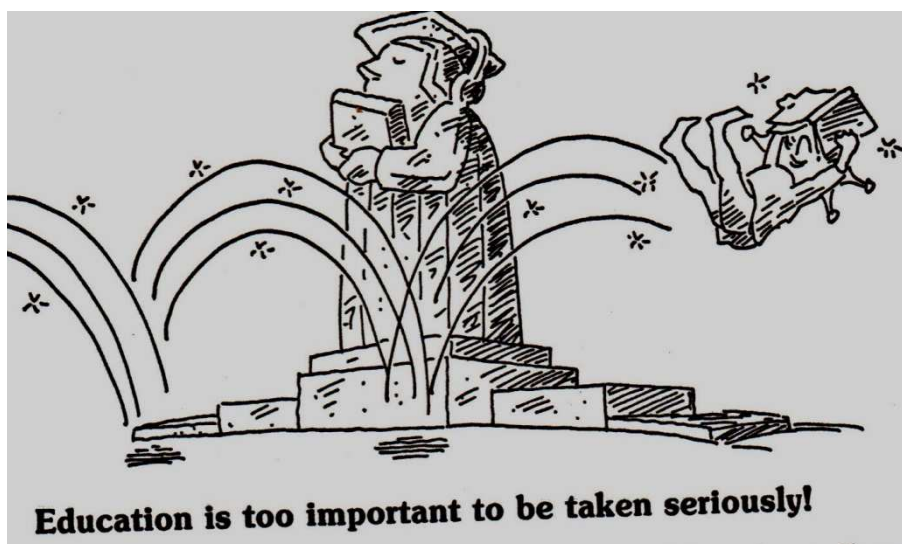


Table I Education is too Important to be Taken Seriously (Loomans, 1993, p. 6)

As stated above, when researching the topic of humor and education in general, I found that there was a plethora of books, articles and so on making statements about the utility of humor in the classroom, but, other than opinions, experiences or ideas not linked to specific studies or references, on their own they stood on a weak (support) foundation. Bryant writes "It has frequently been suggested that using humor in teaching has most beneficial effects. Some of the alleged benefits of embellishing education with levity have been vague and rather grandiose." (Bryant, 1980, p. 511) While a number of the citations in this section might fit into this category of "vague and rather grandiose;"

the utility of these articles is more of an indication of what is found in the extant literature. These references are useful in giving a broad-brush view as to many of the topics and opinions regarding humor and education, building a context for subsequent sections of this document.

With recent programs like No Child Left Behind and the focus the press has had on purported failures in education, there is a widespread movement to improve the education system; oftentimes, however, in the eyes of some, changes that are made are merely refurbished old perennial fads and ideas unsuccessfully tried before.

Higher education faces a number of upcoming challenges as well, what with an increase in the number of high school graduates and the need to be prepared to provide the education these students seek and need. James Hunt noted in 1998 that many colleges and universities were coming up short when he pointed out “Far too many students from all backgrounds leave higher education with their personal aspirations unrealized and with society’s needs for them to learn and contribute unmet.” (Hunt, 1998, p. 8)

The world of higher education is evolving. Donald Hanna, when offering his eleven strategies for higher education points out that

Colleges and universities are facing the challenge of removing the boundaries between higher education institutions and their external publics while at the same time protecting the fundamental values and traditions associated with free academic inquiry, independence of thought, and rights and responsibilities of the faculty.

The world is indeed changing and higher education must change with it, or find itself with buggy whips in a world with automobiles, eight-track music tapes in the digital, MP3 environment, or fax machines in the Internet universe.

In considering how education has in the past responded to this need for change, Jonas (2004, p. 51) points out that “Despite the differences in levels of education, another problem with learning and teaching is that the curriculum and teaching style(s) have not changed much over the years (or centuries).” Kher also stated that “Well-respected scholars such as Ernest Boyer, Alexander Astin, and Sylvia Gride have highlighted the need for instructional improvement in higher education in recent years.” (Kher, 1999, p. 400) Kher continues pointing out that concepts of effective teaching and improving student learning have become items of concern for university faculty and administrators. (Kher, 1996) Might humor be useful in satisfying the need for instructional improvement and address the concerns of the higher education "powers that be?" A vast majority of articles believe this to be the case. Key articles are reviewed here.

Regarding humor and education, Boverie (1990) notes the abundance of information pointing out the importance of humor to education. She brings us (Boverie, 1990, p. 75) to Civikl who writes, “Humor is a major force and [a] needed one for dealing with the real world. The real world is filled with humor but is often excluded from the world of teaching and learning.”

Humor has been purported by many authors in many studies to have a positive influence on education and learning. Dr. Nancy Snow, Associate Professor of Philosophy at Marquette University noted that “Having a sense of humor is indispensable and it’s important to use it in the classroom.” (Mueller, 2008, p. 24) While her comment is her opinion based on her years of teaching experience, and not supported here by study data, it is noteworthy.

Cornett and Lundberg both consider the link between humor and education.

Cornett (1986) proposes thirteen reasons why teachers need to get serious about incorporating humor into their lessons. Interestingly enough, Lundberg (2002) provides (also) thirteen reasons why humor and laughter should be a part of every classroom. Cornett (1986, p. 9) provided the concepts of "Liberates creative capacities...Develops a positive attitude... (and) Humor makes class more interesting. Lundberg (2002, p. 9) listed "Laughter reduces tension and anxiety...Humor motivates and energizes...Humor encourages creativity...Humor helps students accept new ideas...Laughter helps show that mistakes are a normal part of learning"

While I did not provide the entire list of twenty-six topics, it is key to note that both of these lists contain items proclaiming the importance of humor to providing a learning environment with no/less stress which could be associated with the relief theory as discussed above, especially by the Pedde study which pointed me in this direction.

Looking through a student lens, Garner writes "Students indicate that humor can increase their interests in learning, and research has demonstrated that students who have teachers with a strong orientation to humor tend to learn more." (Garner, 2006, p. 177) (While this is a study, and details will be provided later, it seemed noteworthy to mention in this section.)

In considering the importance of humor to education, thoughts from Schwarz, Kottler, and Shatz continue to be relevant. An educator, Schwarz writes

Seldom does the topic of humor appear in the professional literature or media reports, and rarely can 'joking around' be found as the subject of an in-service session or a conference...Yet humor remains one of our most powerful tools--for learning and teaching...Most important, our own experiences tell us that laughter can accomplish much. (Schwarz, 1989, p. 1)

While Schwarz provides no real support for her claims, relying only on "our own experiences" nevertheless they do align with the prevalent opinion of the extant literature.

Kottler writes that "Of the personal dimension of teaching, humor is the most human of them all. Teachers who value humor, who not only tolerate laughter and fun in their classrooms, but even invite them in and encourage them to stay, are perceived by students as being more interesting and relevant than those who appear grim and humorless." (Kottler, 2000, p. 16)

In moving from the concept of the "personal" dimension to more general education and teaching, Shatz points out that

As a pedagogical device, humor can promote various objectives, such as to increase student interest and attention, facilitate the student-teacher relationship, provide students with a "mental break" or promote the understanding and retention of a concept. In contrast to humorists, who gauge success by laughter, educators measure the effectiveness of humor by how it promotes learning...In the traditional classroom, humor does not constitute radical pedagogy, as educational experts have long advocated its use. (Shatz, 2006, p. 2)

We have read about several ideas as to why humor is valuable in education--but why? More importantly, how does humor affect the classroom environment and ultimately learning?

Does Humor Build a Better Educational Atmosphere?

The Pedde study has been described above linking humor to building a caring environment which in turns improves learning. Another study, by Aboudan and as noted before, is worth reviewing.

Aboudan studied the English as a Second Language classroom in the United Arab Emirates. She found that for such a subject to be successfully taught, all students need to

be relaxed and not concerned about making an incorrect response or statement. She further studied the utility of humor in such a classroom and how humor helps build this atmosphere which could be viewed as an application of the relief theory. (Details of this study can be found below in the section with studies.)

Bostina-Bratu posits that "laughter can create an open atmosphere for learning, get and hold students' attention, increase retention of what is learned, foster a constructive attitude towards mistakes, and stimulate both creative and critical thinking." (Bostina-Bratu, 2007, p. 1) We again see the link of laughter and humor. Deiter writes that the "positive psychological effects of laughter include reduced anxiety and stress, greater self-esteem, and increased self-motivation... The use of humor in the classroom can help to create a more positive learning environment by breaking down barriers to communication between the professor and students (which are also barriers to learning)" (Deiter, 1998, p. 1)

Along the same lines, Dickmeyer claims that "learning can become more enjoyable and less stressful in a laughter-filled class." Garner states that "Better comprehension, increased retention of material, and a more comfortable learning environment have all been attributed to the effective use of these (H.A.M.--humor, analogy and metaphor) strategies." (Garner, 2005, p. 1) He continues by stating that the "use of humor as a pedagogical tool has been shown to reduce classroom anxiety, create a more positive atmosphere, as well as facilitate the learning process." (Garner, 2005, p. 2)

All of these authors seem to be using the relief theory of humor in pointing how humor helps build an environment conducive to education.

Impact on Retention of Information and Learning?

As a number of sources have been cited linking the use of humor to a caring, better educational atmosphere and enhanced learning, these seemed to be rather general statements. Let's dig deeper specifically into learning and retention of information.

Citing Casper (1999), Ziv (1988), Kaplan (1977), Aboudan states that "Research suggests that general comprehension and retention of classroom messages were significantly improved by the use of humor..." and that "learning induced by humor strengthens the learning memory." (Aboudan, 2009, pp. 2-3)

Deiter writes that the

one main reason for using humor in the classroom is to improve student learning...Humor can help students retain subject matter, especially if the humor reinforces the class material...My own surveys of students indicate they tend to agree they are more likely to remember material if it is presented with humor. There are commonsense reasons that I have witnessed for believing that the use of humor helps students. The main reason is that the use of humor helps to gain students' attention and keep their interest in the material being presented....Also, it is physically impossible to laugh and snore at the same time. (Deiter, 1998, pp. 1-2)

In addressing how the inclusion of humorous elements in subject matter improves information subject matter retention, Royse (2001) believes that this may occur since boredom is being reduced by the utilization of humor.

Dickmeyer points out that a study performed by Korobkin in 1988 found several benefits of humor to learners. This study "concluded that humor increases retention of material, student-teacher rapport, attentiveness and interest, and motivation towards and satisfaction with learning...and that it decreased academic stress, anxiety toward subject matter, dogmatism and class monotony." (Dickmeyer, 1998, p. 8)

Like most of the work in this section thus far linking humor to improved learning, Loomans and Kolberg continue to argue, based on their experience and perhaps on uncited references, “we discovered that whenever we included humor, learning occurred without fear, struggle, or self-deprecation.....You can feel a safety net of caring spread as minds expand, hearts open, conversations heighten.” (Loomans, 1993, p. xii) They sum up their belief that humor is a strong tool for the classroom (leading to the discovery of knowledge) by saying that when you “apply the principles of HA HA and you will behold the most wonderful gift of all—the Great AHA!” (Loomans, 1993, p. 4) Humor, they contend, opens the mind and improves both learning and retention of information. In digging deeper into the background or supporting evidence of their claims (similar to other citations in this section), all that was offered was that "we have designed our seminars and workshops with the "funny factor" in mind, using ourselves as our gauge...resources are listed in the back of the book" for independent detailed follow-up. (Loomans, 1993, p. xii)

As noted before, this lack of documented support seemed to be typical of many books about the importance of humor to education. Claims are made and common sense is frequently decried as support of the statements. This limitation aside, many of these claims are sufficiently noteworthy, however, as they do present interesting ideas

One article (Kher, 1999), drawing on a number of studies, (Ferguson & Campinha-Bacote 1989; Hill 1988; Schwarz, 1989; Warnock 1989; Walter 1990) states

teachers must be creative because of the critical role they play in creating an environment conducive to optimal student learning. Humor is often identified as a teaching technique for developing a positive learning environment. (Kher, 1999, p. 1)

The document continues purporting the concept that a supportive environment makes learning become easier for the student. "Humor is a catalyst for classroom "magic," when all the educational elements converge and teacher and student are positive and excited about learning." (Kher, 1999, p. 1) Humor they argue can be manifested as an ice-breaker or to facilitate creativity. Additionally this article points to a study by Kaplan and Pasco in 1977 that "found students were able to improve retention of subject matter when instructors used humorous examples by linking learning to the use of mnemonic devices ...jokes and anecdotes seem to provide a memorable context for student recall." (Kher, 1999, p. 3)

In looking back, we have seen the potential usefulness of humor to help build a learning environment. Is humor the answer to all challenges in the classroom? Obviously this is not the case, but can humor be used too much? Is humor more effective if it is more applicable to the subject matter being studied?

Humorous Elements in the Classroom--Can They be Overused?--Is Relevancy Important?

Ashkenazy (2000) on the Israel ministry of foreign affairs website posted that

He (Ziv—Tel Aviv University Professor of Psychology, author of over fifty papers praising the use of humor in education) claimed that humor can significantly increase recall, but it should be used sparingly. In a previous study, Ziv had found that the optimal dosage of humor desired to be effective was, at most, three to four instances of humor per hour. Thus in order to gain maximum benefit, humor should be mobilized only to underscore core concepts.

I have to admit, I struggle with this generalization as it is based on a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching in general, a concept which I could never apply in my experiences and which seems unsupported by other research and literature

Stambor (2006) quotes "...Berk, who suggests that to be effective, comedy must complement—and not distract from—course material." (Here Berk is using "comedy" and "humor" as synonyms.) They are pointing out their belief that humor should be relevant to the subject matter, which can mean humorous stories or examples related to the subject material. While this remains a somewhat one-size-fits-all concept, I would argue that humor too irrelevant may be distracting; but saying all humor must be relevant could make it somewhat difficult coming up with too many humorous items for honors trig class. Stambor (2006) p. 62) I explored this assumption in my research study.

Boverie (1990) and Buckman (2010) point out that classroom manifestations of humor include humorous articles, cartoons, jokes, quotations, etc. Keeping the humor relevant to the lesson will make the combination of student laughing and learning more likely. So might one conclude with respect to the use of humor that it in general it should be relevant while not in excess?

Teachers and Humor---Like Vinegar and Oil--Or Fingers in a Glove?

While Buckman (2010, p. 7) reminds us that classroom humor seems to be both spontaneous and random, Boverie (1990, p. 85) stresses that in order to effectively use humor in the classroom will require planning. Humor, then, will need to be built into (but seem natural therein) in our lesson content, instructional methods and techniques. While

these topics are seemingly antithetical, humor that seems contrived and too-well planned is many times not considered humorous.

Continuing on in that vein, Berk goes into detail discussing high-risk and low-risk humor, where we learn of the risk an instructor takes of “bombing” when using humor. Good planning should minimize the possibility of laying the proverbial egg in front of the class and potentially maximize learning by the student—a definite “win-win!”

Are teachers ready for humor? We read in Royse (2001, p. 248), “If you find yourself asking, ‘But is humor really appropriate in the classroom?’ you need only to think back to the worst lectures, the worst speakers you can recall. The odds are that many of them attempted to keep your interest by occasionally injecting a joke or relating an amusing story.”

As is the case so many times, Loomans (1993) reminds us that teachers need to remember that if the material is not interesting, absorbing or fun for us, it’s probably not interesting or fun for our students either. If we aren’t interested, neither will the students, and the students will notice this lack of interest.

Starting out a class with humor is a good idea but not a new one. Friedman (2002) describes this technique of using humor to enliven lectures being as ancient as the Babylonian Talmud. Rabbah (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbos, 30b), a Talmudic sage who lived 1700 years ago, would say something humorous before starting a lecture to the scholars, and they would laugh; after that, he would begin his lecture. Might this be considered to be an ICE (age) BREAKER? In spite of the attempt at humor, one could view this as an application of the relief theory of humor before it existed

Jonas (2004) explains how

Experts say that as a leader you have thirty seconds to set the tone of the meeting, class or presentation. This is not a long time, so you must come out with passion and purpose. ... Your best bet is to quickly get to the point, explain the mission or purpose, or grab the audience's attention with a pertinent joke. The joke will set the tone of the meeting while addressing the topic. (Jonas, 2004, p. 36)

It should be easy to agree on the concept that teachers are indeed leaders. Using humor in the classroom, perhaps as a startup icebreaker, can set the tone to the rest of the class. Again, we are returning to the use of humor helping build an educational-beneficial environment.

There might be some "old-school", "hard-liner" educators (labels like disparaging humor can be hurtful and need to be used most carefully; I am applying these labels with my tongue firmly planted in my cheek) who feel using humor in a classroom setting is tantamount to giving up control in a "no smiling in the classroom until Thanksgiving" way of getting the students "under control." Peter Warnock notes "It is really difficult for a student or colleague to turn off and become hostile when they are regularly enjoying a good laugh or chuckle with their teacher/leader." (Warnock, 1989, p. 22) Most students, if they are in a welcoming environment, will not try to change the setting which they like; that being said, there are stories about "those classes" for which there seems to be no answer other than surviving until the next term. Once again, we return to the concept of humor and the learning atmosphere.

Taking a different view, however, Lundberg (2002) warns,

Students sometimes look at laughter as a signal to get out of hand. Or they may lose control easily when a highly structured environment becomes more relaxed. You may need to guide students in learning that there are boundaries with humor as there are with anything else...We teach students how to behave in so many other areas of life; it should not be surprising that we need to teach them how to

behave sensibly with humor, as well. They can easily learn that laughter and learning can work together, side by side. (Lundberg, 2002, p. 11)

Humor not the Panacea

In a similar vein to the Lundberg citation just above, raising the proverbial red flag that using humor in the classroom will need to be applied with vigilance. Using humor is not the answer without planning and in all situations. In continuing with this thought, so as to not be viewed as a believer that humor does not have its limits or is a panacea to all educational challenges and a solution bringing about world peace, a few of the authors did point out some considerations to keep in mind as one might be using humor. Stambor writes that "Humor can be overdone to the point that students are so busy awaiting the next gag that they miss the teacher's message." (Stambor, 2006, p. 64)

Bostina-Bratu notes that "Humour alone cannot save a poorly planned class, and sometimes, too much humour can work against student learning." (Bostina-Bratu, 2009, p. 2) In a similar vein, Dickmeyer points out that the "misuses of humor in the classroom may be more devastating than the advantages gained by creating an open environment" (Dickmeyer, 1993, p. 1) continuing that instructors in some cases might be considered to be frustrated comics and not teachers or using an excess of non-germane humor and derail the classic proverbial train of thought of the class.

Garner (2005) believed that "Humor is most effective when it is appropriate to the audience, targeted to the topic, and placed in the context of the learning experience. In the same light, Shatz (2006) notes that while audiences expect comedians to be funny, they do not have the same expectations for instructors. What might "work" for a comedian would probably "bomb" in the classroom, but, that being said, attempts at

humor in a classroom, being judged using a different metric than a comedian, very well might be appreciated by the student as an effort by the teacher to make the class more interesting.

In summarizing this section, we have seen how humor helps build an atmosphere conducive for education with a positive impact on learning and student opinion of their teachers. This section ended with a warning, which seems to be captured in the words written by Shatz when he notes "humor is not a pedagogical panacea... However, the judicious, appropriate and timely use of humor can augment teaching by increasing students' interest and attention." (Shatz, 2006, p. 2)

As previously noted, this section consists of a broad-brush look at what is being said about humor and education in the preponderance of "how-to", "what makes sense" books and articles written with little or no supporting evidence (with a few studies covered on a high-level). The next section traverses into the region looking at academic studies that have been conducted regarding humor and education.

3. STUDIES ABOUT HUMOR AND EDUCATION

“Quick, Batman,” Robin yelled as the super-criminal ran toward them laughing loudly, “it’s time to load the Subjective Multidimensional Interactive Laughter Evaluation,” the Coping Humor Scale and Svebak’s Sense of Humor Questionnaire to find out how funny the Joker really is!” (In order-- SMILE from Berk, (Buckman, 2010, p. 4), "Coping" from Martin and Lefcourt (Talbot, 1996, p .4) and Svebak Questionnaire (Talbot, 1996, p. 4.)) I will readily admit the Dynamic Duo would probably NOT be using these tests and approaches; I will also admit that just the existence of such seemingly scientific tools surprised me when the subject upon which they are focused is humor--seemingly adding gravity to levity.

I did not use any of these tools in my approach; that being said, I thought they should be noted because they are useful to framing my study. The quantitative studies did provide a number of results of interest when looking at themes such as the connection between humor and a successful classroom, spontaneity of humor, the impact humor in the classroom has on subject matter retention, etc. A number of these concepts will be reviewed below.

This section will review in detail studies that are specifically related to my research question. In considering my research question and comparing it to those used in these other studies, I found that my efforts complemented while not replicating these previous efforts. My approach was mixed methods in nature and focused on higher education; the studies reviewed below are in general quantitative in nature when considering higher education. While a few studies were qualitative, these were focused on K-12 students.

My research also listened to the voice of the student and their constructed views of not only what humor was, but what makes up teacher effectiveness as well; this was not done by any of these previous studies. Similar to the other studies, however, and in order to keep comparisons more straightforward, I focused on a lecture-based, teacher-centric, large-classroom educational paradigm as the basis for analysis. Finally, it should be noted that I found no qualitative studies regarding humor and the students' perception of teacher effectiveness which, of course, is the focus of my research.

As seen in the previous section, there has been much written about humor as well as the potential relationship between humor and education; however, unlike the previous section which was light on supporting evidence, in this segment I will be focusing on research linking humor and higher education. Here I unpack the details and supporting evidence behind the theories regarding humor and education.

As noted above, the study by Pedde (1996) helped me originally decide on a direction in which to head; her work discusses the relationship between a caring classroom and how students become more engaged, ultimately improving the learning process. Continuing in this vein, this section will begin with a study by Tribble where he researched the topic of student self-efficacy as impacted by humor in the classroom. While seemingly very close to my research topic at first blush, there are a number of differences as well as open questions I have regarding this study. These are discussed below.

Other studies reviewed in this section I sorted into a number of groups which are listed below:

- a. Student self-efficacy as impacted by humor in the classroom

- b. The importance of humor in building a learning-conducive environment (revisiting the topic researched by Pedde--Aboudan),
- c. The impact humor has on comprehension, retention and test performance (moving from the environment to the actual "learning" process--Kaplan, Casper, Torok)
- d. The effect on higher education and adult students created by the use of humor in the classroom (focusing more on the higher education student--Williams)
- e. The effects determined by the use of different types of humor (looking at the application of humor itself regarding appropriateness, self-deprecating and student-deprecating humor--St. Pierre)
- f. The role that gender and race plays in the use of humor in the classroom (how is the effectiveness of the of humor impacted by gender, and race variables--Garner, Bryant and Prosser) and finally
- g. How dean and faculty see the role humor plays in the classroom. (Bolinger)

As the discussion traverses across these different studies and topics, it is important to keep focused on a number of ideas for each:

- i. How is humor defined--by the researcher?--by the informant? (As I have noted above, if questions are built using terms potentially with a number of definitions, what can truly be inferred from the responses?)
- ii. Is the study qualitative or quantitative? (Is the voice of the informant really being heard?)
- iii. How is the voice of the student been heard/gathered/collected? (Can a survey truly capture the voice of the student?)
- iv. If retention of knowledge or learning is "tested" upon what concepts are the questions based?
- v. When was humor used in conjunction with the topics being interrogated by the questions/researcher?

Student Self-Efficacy As Impacted by Humor in the Classroom

How do students feel their self-efficacy is impacted by humor? This topic seemed to be close to my research question. One can consider student self-efficacy as a partial measure of instructor efficacy as perceived by the student, that is to say if the student believes he/she is a successful/efficacious student, that belief can in a large part be attributed to the teacher and how efficacious they are.

Tribble (2001) surveyed 100 undergraduate students (in a total of six general education classes) regarding their perceptions about learning from humor and non-humor. Three of the classes viewed a humorous version of the lecture, while the other classes viewed nonhumorous video treatments. After viewing the video, each student was given a questionnaire measuring their self-reports of AIME (Amounts of Invested Mental Effort) in comprehending the video. After the questionnaire an achievement test was given designed to measure problem-solving and factual recognition. Finally, an attitude/interest test was administered to determine the differences in interest and attitude toward the video viewed.

Tribble found that there was a "high level of interest and positive attitude" resulting from the use of humor; however, contrary to what he had expected (and what I would have been looking for), Tribble's efforts did not show any direct influences that humor has on AIME or perceptions of self-efficacy or learning. Additionally participants rated humorous presentations as less believable, seemingly contradictory, even though the general opinion was that humor was "generally perceived as an easier, better way to learn, while also requiring more effort to comprehend content." (Tribble, 2001, p. iii)

At first I was somewhat perplexed by Tribble's results, so I looked at his study through a more critical lens. First of all, because his study was in the quantitative

paradigm, it is evident that his focus was not on exploring the individual voices of the student. Another factor when using quantitative methods is that a term such as humor can either be defined singularly or left undefined as part of the data collection methodology. I would argue that this prevents the quantitative study from unpacking the student's constructed definition of humor.

Another idea to consider as part of the data collection process was that when testing for comprehension, was humor used near, before or after the specific topic or concept to be interrogated? For example, if humor was used right before a topic that would be tested, would humor work? But, if humor was used just after a topic that would be tested, would the student remember the topic or be distracted by the humor?

All of that being said, the results that according to the opinions of the students found that humor in the classroom made the class more interesting yet at the same time less believable seemed to be antithetical concepts. In shifting our focus to the classroom and its associated environment, what effect might humor have on this setting?

The Importance of Humor in Building a Learning-Conducive Environment

Aboudan studied the English as a Second Language classroom in the United Arab Emirates. Based on her three studies of a population of approximately 200 female students studying English as a required second language at the United Arab Emirates University, 80% reported that "jokes help them pay more attention during class time and 70% pointed out that humor helps learning difficult material...99% indicated that jokes help them pay more attention during class time and increases their level of concentration." (Aboudan, 2009, p. 1)

The first of her studies dealt with 200 students across introductory, intermediate and advanced English classes which surveyed the students on the effect of humor on learning, attention and concentration. The second study worked with 160 students about the influence of humor on the classroom environment or atmosphere. 80 were placed in classes which allowed linguistic humor, with the other 80 being exposed to little or no humor. The groups later answered questions about the effect of humor and its effect on classroom atmosphere. Her findings were that

(71%) of all students found humor to be contributing to positive atmosphere in the classroom, rather than losing control. Interestingly, a substantial number of students favoured having humor as part of their everyday English classroom learning (65%), and quite a high proportion of all students - (85%) felt that humor even encourages them to express their opinions freely, using the target language.

The third study dealt with the effect of using humor in teaching on student learning. Exams were given the same or next day to test immediate recall. Some six to nine weeks later, tests and quizzes were given to measure learning and recall and comparing the test groups. As noted before, a significant difference emerged between test scores measuring learning and recall between classes with humor and without humor pointing out that humor facilitates retention of information significantly. Again, similar to my comments regarding Tribble's study above, we can ask when was humor applied--by/near the topics that the questions were based on?

Aboudan found that for such a subject to be successfully taught, all students need to be relaxed and not concerned about making an incorrect response or statement—a seemingly key concept for a language class. She further studied the utility of humor in such a classroom and its usefulness as an effective tool in creating this relaxed, learning-conducive environment

So consistent with Pedde, Aboudan posits the utility of humor in creating a learning atmosphere continuing the theme that humor has a positive impact on the classroom and ultimately on student learning.

Moving from the concept of humor creating a stress-free, relaxed environment, we come to the concept of humor facilitating retention of information. Studies by Kaplan, Casper and Torok focused on this topic.

The impact humor has on comprehension and retention of information and test performance

Kaplan and Pascoe (1977) conducted an experiment to study the effect of humor and humorous examples upon the comprehension and retention of lecture material. Introductory psychology classes of university students (N=508) viewed either a serious lecture or one of three versions of humorous lectures (1. humorous examples related to concepts in the lecture (concept humor), 2. unrelated to the concepts (nonconcept humor) or 3. a combination of both). This took place as part of their regular instruction.

A test of comprehension was given twice--immediately after the lecture and 6 weeks later. Kaplan and Pascoe found that while immediate comprehension was not facilitated by the use of humorous examples, but upon retesting later, subject matter retention was significantly improved by having viewed a lecture with humorous examples illustrating the concepts. Similar to above, one wonders when humor was "applied" during the lecture in relation to the topics being tested. In a similar study, Casper believed that laughter only because of its arousing quality would enhance long-term memory (basing her opinion on a study by Apter and Smith (Apter and Smith,

1976.) While Casper does not provide a definition of humor, the concept of humor's "arousing quality" was proclaimed.

This arousing quality of humor was linked by Casper to reversal theory conceived by psychologist Dr. Michael J. Apter and psychiatrist Dr. Ken Smith in the mid-1970s.

Reversal theory "explains behavior in terms of phenomenological processes, providing an explanation for different kinds of non-rational behavior such as sports, overeating, smoking, etc." (Casper, 1999, p. 4) She continued to apply reversal theory to her study, even though reversal theory was "not specifically a theory of humor, reversal theory has been utilized to explore the processes of humor." (Casper, 1999, p. 4) All of this seemed to fit as she didn't define humor either.

Again referring to Apter and Smith (1976) and the concept of arousal, Casper writes "In applying reversal theory to humor, the main way that humor increases arousal is through the use of what reversal theory calls cognitive synergies. A synergy indicates a 'bringing together of two cognitive opposites so as to enhance each other's phenomenological qualities." (Apter and Smith, 1976, p. 96) Humorous situations involve an "identity synergy" in that the opposites are seen as two aspects of the same situation." For example one might view a roller coaster ride as exhilarating at one time and something to fear at another time; a child seeing his mother could be happy (it's supper time) or bad (you just misbehaved and were caught.) Might one consider these "opposites" could be seen as similar to the incongruity theory of humor?

A sixteen multiple-choice question instrument was administered to 87 males and 123 females across two introductory psychology classes. Each student was exposed once to each of four lectures/humor manipulation combinations:

1. Humor relevant to the subject matter,
2. Irrelevant humor,
3. Laughter only and
4. No laughter and then a test consisting of sixteen multiple-choice questions was administered.

Casper determined that the literature suggested that humor would have a positive impact on long-term memory and she hypothesized that this was the case as well. That being said, her research showed no significant relationships between this sense of arousal and learning. In general, test performance was not significantly different between the various humor conditions.

In looking at the role that gender played in this study, males performed better on a test over material that was presented with laughter. On the other hand, females performed better on a test over material that was presented with no laughter.

Casper does venture somewhat into the area of gender, to be considered below, as well as the appropriateness and relevance of the humor, also considered below. All of that being said, she did demonstrate the utility of humor in improving test performance, she just found no significant difference between the use of different types of humor and the use of laughter.

Another researcher Torok (2004) conducted a study which consisted of thirteen professors who were teaching two sections of the same course across three undergraduate disciplines (biology, educational psychology and theatre) from which 124 students participated. These students were asked at the beginning of the class to participate--all of the students who were approached volunteered for the study.

- 73% of the study group strongly agreed that they felt positively toward a professor who uses humor constructively (or used "humor as a tool in their

instruction, relating most of their jocularity to the primary educational message." Torok (2004, p. 14)

- 59% strongly agreed that humor builds a strong sense of community.
- 80% of the participants stated that they learned a concept better when a teacher used humor.

Thus, Torok shows how students believed they learned "better" in a classroom with humor, even though she never defines what humor was to her or to each student. Torok gives us an inkling as to what the student might have been thinking--within the confines of a written survey, i.e., that students felt that humor does help learning.

This section discussed studies with mixed results. One showed the efficacy of humor on longer term retention of information. Another study, while finding no significant results regarding humor on learning, there were two interesting trends. The former was that males did earn better test scores with classes using humor, while the latter showed no such results for females. While these "trends" do have me scratching my head a little, this study did pique my interest in trying to unpack the role that gender plays, resulting in my putting this concept on my list of items to interrogate during my data collection. The last study showed the positive results of humor on learning concepts. Hence, the common theme is that based on these studies, humor does have a positive impact on learning.

The Effect on Higher Education and Adult Students Created by the Use of Humor in the Classroom

Williams (2001) conducted a study with 36 student-athletes from 15 sports teams; all of the students were expecting to graduate. The research took place at a NCAA Division 1, predominantly white, Mid-eastern school with the participants characterized as:

Male---13, female---23
Black---17, white---13, Hispanic---2, other---4.
Participants ranged from 18 to 24 years of age.

Early in the study, Williams conjectured that the use of humor would show a significant and positive impact on the learning by his test groups. He further considered that "humor can play an important role in learning if the learner employs a particular type of strategy or tactic...If the content material is humorous, then the student can relate or appreciate the nature of the material...and learn the material much faster." (Williams, 2001, p. 29) As part of his theory, Williams described humor as being comprised of a three step process: arousal, problem solving, and resolution; he then presents information showing the potential positive cognitive benefit provided by humor. (This is the "arousal" concept linking somewhat Williams' study with Torok's research and use of reversal theory.)

Williams broke his test population into two groups, both receiving instruction using the same material but with one of the groups having humor interspersed in the classroom. Using pre- and post-test approaches, no differences were found between the groups other than the nonhumor participants were not as adept at using key words used in the lecture. Thus, while there was an improvement of retention of key words, humor provided no statistically significant change.

Williams uses "anything that an individual deems funny" (Williams, 2001, p. 4) as the definition of humor, but does not seek the student definition of this term. He also uses the concept of "mentoring" as the topic "taught" to the students, a topic they were in general already motivated to study and may have skewed somewhat the examination of retention of information.

In this section, studies have been cited showing the positive impact humor has on comprehension, retention of material, and test performance. But, the last study brings up the idea, is the relevance of the humor important in improving learning and helping build a learning-conducive atmosphere? This is a concept to be revisited in the next section.

The Effects Determined by the Use of Different Types of Humor

James St. Pierre posited that while "relatively few empirically testable generalizations have been developed concerning humor, it is still possible to examine its effects." (St. Pierre, 2001, p. 1) So did St. Pierre set out to test this effect of something he had trouble defining?

The author used 367 students (251 females, 116 males) with a mean age of 19.5 years. They were selected from a pool of available research participants in the College of Communications & Information Systems as designated by the Committee for the Allocation of Research Participants (CARP.) While some of the students received extra credit for their efforts, and others received credit toward a college introductory course research requirement, no student received monetary compensation.

The students were broken into three groups each of which watched a ten-minute video. At first blush, one would wonder how (or why) anyone could believe that ten a minute video would be sufficient upon which to base a study? That being said, perhaps based on the extensive time the students spent in the classroom over the years, their judgments seemed to be "right on!"

But returning to the details of the study, one group's video contained an unknown teacher using student-disparaging humor while the other groups watched self-disparaging humor or no humor at all. The participants were told that as part of the study they were

going to evaluate the universities teachers and students. In actuality the study was to examine the effects of a teacher's use of humor during a lecture and information acquired from the video lecture.

The study by St. Pierre (2001) was also one of the few studies that considered gender regarding the use of humor in the classroom. St. Pierre's (2001) findings supported previous studies that showed that females responded more favorably toward the use of self-disparaging humor by their instructors, regardless of gender, than to humor that disparages others. Additionally, the appeal of a female instructor to females was enhanced by the use of self-disparaging humor but decreased by the use of others-disparaging humor. On the other hand, male students had no preference regarding a teacher's humor.

Providing additional detail on this study, professional actors were used in lieu of professors, and a lecture was given on good health. (The students had been told the purpose of the study was to evaluate the university's teachers and students.) The mixed gender student population was randomly assigned to one of six experimental combinations:

- male teacher/student-disparaging humor;
- male teacher/self-disparaging humor;
- male teacher/no humor;
- female teacher/student-disparaging humor;
- female teacher/self-deprecating humor; and
- female teacher/no humor.

St. Pierre used a pre-test on 367 incoming students as part of a new student orientation to determine the desired characteristics of an ideal teacher, from which four components were to be used later. These characteristics were Affective Character Traits, Humor-Related Traits, Intelligence Character Traits and Interactive Character Traits and across the groups there were 36 adjective scales. They were used for headings/categories into which to sort the responses, and then to code and analyze. For example, "the first component, labeled *Affective Character Traits*, showed high component loadings on the following 7 adjective scales: warm (.72), polite (.71), pleasant (.67), nice (.62) sensitive (.cheerful (.60) and friendly (.57.)" (St. Pierre, p. 2), and were helpful in analyzing the various data points.

After viewing the video, the participants completed the Characteristics questions (using the adjective scale), answered four questions to measure their evaluation of the teacher, and finally eight additional questions were answered to ascertain information acquisition from the lecture.

Of particular interest to me, and not stressed by any of my readings was that even though higher education students are still attending class and (hopefully) learning, they could be considered to be expert/mature/experienced students having had a minimum exposure to twelve years of teachers--good, bad, (ugly) and otherwise. This study showed that based on a short video, (I did not use video) they quickly were able to evaluate/agree with the general consensus of the instructors' perceived effectiveness.

Also of interest was the role that gender plays in the study here both of the student population and the instructors themselves. I considered gender as a factor in my study.

Will females have a different view of what constitutes humor and its importance to how they perceive the effectiveness of their instructors?

In continuing on, we move from this group considering "general" humor in the classroom, to self- and student-deprecating humor as well as viewing the results through a gender lens as well. As with gender, I considered the type of humor the students perceive being utilized in their classroom.

The Role that Gender and Race Plays in the Use of Humor in the Classroom

While still being a study in the world of higher education, Garner focused for his study in an on-line environment somewhat different from the traditional classroom but still a classroom. While seemingly out of place in this section, and straying from the lecture-based, teacher-centric, large-classroom educational paradigm, Garner in a sense extrapolates from these other studies still resulting in the same/similar conclusion as the other studied, i.e., the importance of humor to education.

Garner's study (Garner, 2006) took place in a four-year university and initially consisted of 117 undergraduates studying research methods and statistics in an on-line environment.

This topic was chosen due to the prevalent "dreaded" opinion they believed to be held by many students for the subject matter. The volunteer population was randomly placed into one of two groups and told that they were to review three video-taped lectures, each containing different lecture formats being considered by the university. The groups that were actually used for statistical analysis consisted of forty-two participants in the humor group and fifty-two in the control, non-humor group.

While many other studies are cited in this section, this quantitative study showed the significance relating humor to a "successful" classroom. The study concluded that while there were no significant results based on gender or race, statistically significant results that were determined included (all for the humor group) their lectures received higher ratings, believed that their lectures better communicated the information to be covered, they rated the instructor higher and most importantly the humor group recalled and retained more of the topical information. These results were not surprising to the researchers as they believed that humor would have a positive impact on the classroom.

Bryant (1980) conducted a study which also looked at humor in education and its relationship to gender. In this research a random sample of 70 separate undergraduate courses was selected in which students in an introductory course in communications were enrolled. One person from each of these 70 classes was chosen and told they were to tape record one-day's presentation in their course, while also noting the teacher's gender (49 male, 21 female). It should be further noted that these recorders did not know the purpose of their assignments. After their taping was completed, these (unknowing) participants completed a questionnaire evaluating their (recording) instructor on a number of criteria.

Bryant surfaced some interesting results. Male teachers using humor were generally considered to be positively related to appeal, delivery and teacher effectiveness; however, for female instructors, the use of non-hostile humor resulted in a loss of appeal. These findings suggested that male professors should consider levity in their classrooms while noting that it is doubtful that "'lightening' lectures with levity has much effect on students' perceptions of their professors' competence." (Bryant, 1980, p. 517)

The results of this study are in opposition to the Garner study above which concluded that while there were no significant results based on gender; however, even Bryant's results had a contradictory feel to them the way the results split on gender It would be interesting to have the authors of these studies compare and contrast their results in a public forum.

In a similar study, Prosser (1997) built a study based on responses from 210 members of the Commission of Professors of Adult Educators (CPAE) who taught in a formal class setting. (Prosser, 1997) Prosser states, "Humor can be defined by 'any event that is characterized by a sensitivity to or appreciation of ludicrous, incongruous, or comical events.'" (Prosser, 1997, p. 16) Eighty four items about the use of humor in teaching adults comprised the study's questionnaire. The questions themselves were comprised of some Likert scale types with other questions looking for specific opinions regarding the use of humor, its appropriateness and how much humor might be used per class.

His findings showed that humor does indeed matter in the instruction of adults with over 90% responding that humor was important for teaching adults for a number of reasons including to create interest, to increase classroom participation, to keep lectures from being boring, to relax students, and to motivate learning.

Prosser (1997) concludes that, "This writer believes strongly that humor aids the adult educator in accepting the challenge from adult learners to "Teach ME!" (Prosser, 1997, p. 9) He continues by pointing out, "As we engage the learner from the beginning of the teaching session with the use of humor and the importance of interpersonal

relationships, we communicate a readiness to teach and a caring attitude toward the learner.” (Prosser (1997, p. 9)

Other findings of interest coming out of Prosser's work was that nearly 70% said humor was important to motivating learning; however, there was no statistical significance linking the use of humor in the classroom to gender, age and ethnicity.

In considering race, Prosser points out that there was a statistically significant difference between ethnicity and the use of humor. When comparing Caucasians to the other represented races (each as separate "groups,") individuals in the "other" group tended to "prefer the use of jokes related to the subject." (Prosser, 1997, p 110) It should be noted that of the 153 respondents, 140 were Caucasian, four were African Americans, one was of Asian descent and one was Native American. (Seven respondents did not provide racial information.) So, based on six non-Caucasians the author noted "statistically significant" results. This is a questionable finding: one should be very cautious in making any statements about race using Prosser's study due to the small non-Caucasian number of informants.

According to Prosser, why might the use of humor be important? "Humor builds unity, relieves stress, and enhances creativity. Humor helps the instructor enjoy teaching and empowers the learner to participate in the project."(Prosser, 1997, p. 2)

How Dean and Faculty See the Role Humor Plays in the Classroom

Up to this point, we have seen studies regarding humor in the classroom (quantitatively) through the eyes of the student. While seemingly unrelated to the research question at hand, similar to the on-line classroom study by Gartner above, Bollinger's (2001) looked at humor's utility in the classroom through the lens of deans

and faculty. What would the opinions and thoughts of the teachers/instructors be with respect to humor in the classroom? Bolinger (2001) surveyed deans and faculty of a number of college schools of business (the specific number was not given--"multiplicity" was used) and obtained a positive correlation between the use of humor and faculty effectiveness (as viewed by faculty.) He found a "correlation between the attribute of humor and effectiveness in faculty members close to a 40 percent gain in effectiveness." (Jonas, 2010, p. 12)

Surveying the deans and faculty regarding the use humor in the classroom seems to close the loop and provide another view in addition to the students and teachers in this regard. The positive responses regarding the utility of humor in the classroom was no surprise when compared to the other studies.

Where Do We Go From Here?

This section looked at studies about:

- Humor in the classroom creates a relaxed/ learning atmosphere
- Humor's effect on comprehension and retention of information
- The use of humor and its impact on student-perceived teacher effectiveness
- Student evaluation of student-disparaging and self-disparaging humor in the classroom
- Humor in education and the relationship to gender, race and age
- The arousing quality of laughter (humor) effect on long-term memory
- Humor and faculty

The studies above show the use of humor to create a caring, learning, stress-less/less-stress environment and ultimately better learning environment is a common

theme. This concept of a caring environment has also been extended to being an integral part of an effective learning environment.

Both student- and faculty-perception of professor/instructor effectiveness has been seen to be enhanced by the use of humor. While, as noted above, some of the studies did not find any significant correlation between the use of humor and learning, this could be attributed to the design of each study itself, the way students were selected, the discrepancy between the views of the researcher and the informant as to what humor is and perhaps timing itself, (e.g. where was humor interspersed in the study and what topics were tested). Timing is important to a comedian. I am not in any way comparing teachers to comedians, but I am ranging in on the timing concept as a key idea to consider.

It appears that any study on humor and education will have difficulties addressing these questions:

- a. During the data collection period, how often and specifically when was humor utilized?
- b. During the post-test, interview or survey, were subject matter topics that were queried before or after the use of humor? How long before or after.
- c. Was what was considered to be humorous to the study designer, considered to be humorous by the informant?

It should be noted that I found no qualitative studies regarding humor and the students' perception of teacher effectiveness. It might be said by some that it is "dangerous" or "problematic" to use student opinions in a study of humor and education. I would counter why not interrogate student perceptions, especially in the higher education domain, where these students could be considered to be experienced "consumers?"

As the discussion traversed across these different studies and topics, as I built my study, I kept the following questions in mind:

- i. How is humor defined by the informant?
- ii. What does the voice of the student tell me?

I worked to unpack the concepts of:

- The theories of humor (especially relief and incongruity,)
- How gender and race are involved in the impact of humor on the classroom, and
- Are other variables such as age, religion and social class also pertinent in this study based on the data I collect?

In review, before moving to the methods section for my study, I would like to reiterate my research question: **What role does student-determined humor in the higher education classroom play in student-perceived instructor effectiveness?** This question seems to be a natural extension of what I have found in my research. The concepts of determining what the student sees humor to be, what the student believes makes up instructor effectiveness and determining these by listening to the voice of the student are lacking in the extant literature; my research will strive to "fill the gap."

CHAPTER 3 Looking for a Link between Laughing and Learning

A Humanitarian Study

The rabbit with the eye patch turned to the frog on crutches and asked about his condition. The frog said, "It was all for a dinner of frog legs, Mr. Rabbit. And you?" The rabbit responded, "Laboratory testing using 'white-out'. But you know, we're pretty lucky we're not human...have you seen how they treat each other?"

Let it be stated that no animals, including those of the human kind were harmed by this study; that being said, I do have to admit that I did try to get between the ears of my respondents/informants to see what they were thinking and feeling. Unlike a professor of mine whose goal was to access the pink matter of his students and stir things up by having them consider new concepts, my mission was to only observe what is going on there.

Using a Qualitative Approach

As Glesne argues, "Quantitative and qualitative researchers do use similar elements in their work... They state a purpose, pose a problem or raise a question, define a research population, develop a time frame, collect and analyze data and present outcomes." (Glesne, 1992, p. 5) In looking at the research process, as Glesne points out, I understood that the social interaction would be complex, but it was my goal to ferret out some of this complexity looking through a qualitative research lens. If I were to seek an answer to my research question, I needed to determine what each student feels humor to be as well as what they believe determines a successful instructor. In reconsidering the previous sentence, perhaps seeking answers (and not the singular "answer") was most

appropriate for each student may, indeed, have a different answer for I am looking into the reality which they have constructed over time.

I chose to incorporate a qualitative approach for a number of reasons, one being that I found no studies that interrogated the student themselves (other than via statistical surveys) as to how they feel about humor in the classroom and its effect, in their opinions, on the effectiveness of their professor. I sought the meanings that students have constructed as to what humor is, when it is appropriate (or not), and when its use creates in their minds an effective learning environment.

Buckman cites Psathas (1973, p. 37) saying that "by asking people questions we discover what they are experiencing, how they interpret their experiences and how they themselves structure the social world in which they live." (Buckman, 2010, p. 64) In this vein I asked the students questions in an attempt to see what they see, to be able to view their world that they have constructed.

Continuing in the spirit of qualitative research, I followed where my study led me as I spoke with my informants, and as I observed the interaction between the students and professor in a classroom setting. I looked for non-verbal behavior and communication, class setting and so forth, while observing the instructor (and students) in action.

While I conducted my research and compared it to a relatively common theme I found during my literature review, i.e., the importance of a caring, learning-friendly environment, I used the relief and incongruity theories as backdrops for comparison where either, both or neither were applicable as well as "fun" being a basic need per Glasser's Choice Theory. As pointed out by Glesne (Glesne, 1992), I used the theories to which I have been exposed and utilized them to build my questions as I conducted the

study itself. As she suggested, "Interpretivists see the goal of theorizing as providing understanding of direct "lived experience" instead of abstract generalizations...

Interpretive scholars consider that every human situation is novel, emergent, and filled with multiple, often conflicting meanings and interpretations." (Glesne, 1992, p. 19)

Moreover, "Qualitative researchers avoid simplifying social phenomena and instead explore the range of behavior and expand their understanding of the resulting interactions." (Glesne, 1992, p. 7)

My goal, then, was to find out how important humor is in the classroom in the eyes of the student. What does each student perceive humor to be? How important, if at all, does each student feel humor is in the classroom as related to the efficacy of their instructor? What does each student believe instructor efficacy to be?

Thus as pointed out by Glesne, I immersed myself in the setting of the lives of others, in a sense I became citizens of their constructed worlds, and used a number of techniques to gather data. (Glesne, 1992) I built student surveys, conducted face-to-face interviews with both students and instructor, and observed a number of classes.

Base of Study

Undergraduate students at a Midwestern university were chosen as the source of my study. Keeping in mind that I wanted to have a class that was an entry-level prerequisite course, I began asking teachers and students on campus to identify instructors known for the use of humor in their classroom. I quickly obtained three names to consider and prioritized this list of three taking into consideration the class level being taught and anecdotal information I had received. Starting with the first candidate on my

list, I scheduled a meeting to determine if he would match my requirements and fulfill my vision.

We discussed my research project and my goals as well as his views on teaching and the use of humor in the class. We agreed that I would visit one of his classes to determine how he and the class itself would match my requirements. This class observation demonstrated that this instructor and this class would be highly suitable for my purposes.

His classroom satisfied my other criteria that I was targeting:

- the classroom should consist of a diverse population
- be a lecture-based, teacher-centric, large classroom format and
- be conducted by a teacher known for the use of humor in the classroom.

The discipline/subject I ended up ultimately choosing (via my professor of choice) was an introductory history class—a core/prerequisite type course—having students from a number of colleges at the university itself. The class consisted of approximately 80 students.

Above the obvious humor-centricity, I was also interested in perceived differences in the members of their respective student bodies. Will engineers or business majors, for example, think less of humor and its use in the classroom? Will Arts and Science majors be less "serious" than their engineer/business counterparts?

In meeting with this instructor, my agreement with him was based on the proviso that I would minimize class interruption. This was accomplished by explaining my study to the students in a few minutes at two different class meetings as to how I was interested

in what students considered to be the traits needed by an instructor to be effective in their eyes--BUT I did not mention humor at this time; not mentioning humor was an attempt to avoid creating a bias for my study. I then described how this study would consist of a survey, interviews and classroom observations.

Use of Survey

While a survey is typically associated with a quantitative study, I used this approach to acquire as much information as quickly as possible about my topic.

As I originally spoke with the class, I provided them with my email address and asked them to send me their email address if they were interested in participating in the survey. Upon receiving this email, I responded with the survey form. (See Appendix B)

All respondents to the survey were registered for a drawing for a Kindle Fire. As part of the survey, five of the nine respondents agreed to participate in the interview process. It should be noted that an additional Kindle Fire drawing was conducted for those who actually participated in a face-to-face interviews. (Names for the drawing were chosen by the class instructor.)

Disappointedly, I had only nine respondents from the 80 students in the class interested in taking the survey. Of these nine, only five were interested in being interviewed. Later in the interviews, I queried why would I have received such a low response rate? It was suggested that due to the all of the activities already being pursued by the students, it was highly likely that the non-volunteers felt their schedules could not accommodate additional activities.

Of those nine willing survey respondents (all of whom completed an IRB form) five were agreeable to be interviewed--details discussed below. (The survey itself can be

found in Appendix B.) The items included in the survey were the result of looking at a number of key items across several websites, articles and publications. Major sources included Hildebrand (1971), Ramsden (1995), Smyth (2011), and UNESCO (2002) from which key items were reviewed with a number of them being chosen to build my survey.

While the use of the survey was important to my study by acquiring a relatively large amount of research data quickly and providing a high-level canvass of the prevailing feelings of the class, interviews played the key role in my study. Mitchell tells us that, "The power of a qualitative presentation lies in the words of the participants and the analysis of the researcher." (Mitchell, 2005, p. 60) He continues discussing that traditionally researchers have used interviews to obtain the feelings, beliefs and thoughts of a "well-placed informant--the village chief or the town thief" (Mitchell, 2005, p. 64) whose feelings, etc. would be highly detailed and accurate portrayals of what is actually occurring in the domain being studied. My goal was to query the students on their opinions about what makes up humor and the relationship between humor and an effective instructor.

I began by asking similar questions to the survey but attempted to delve more into the personal side of the responses. The interview questions themselves naturally were fine-tuned after reviewing a number of the surveys to see what gaps there might be and opportunities for further exploration, but included at minimum:

"What traits do you believe an instructor should have to be effective?"

"How would you define an 'effective' instructor?"

"How would you define humor?"

"In what ways does humor affect (positively and/or negatively) the classroom?"

"What teachers should/should not use humor? (e.g., male, female, young, old, etc.)

- "What types of humor are not effective/ or inappropriate in the classroom?"
- "Are you able to retain class material longer in classes using humor?"
- "How successful do you see your instructor in the class I am observing?"
- "Do feel your class has a real learning atmosphere?"
- "Do you feel less stress in this class? Why or why not?"
- "Do you feel like you can speak up more easily in this class? Why or why not?"
- "Is it OK to make mistakes in this class?"
- "If you were a teacher, what methods would you use as an instructor?"
- "Are you able to retain class material longer in classes using humor?"

As stated above, five informants from the classes volunteered to be interviewed for a minimum of three 30-45 minute, face-to-face interviews. (Details about these informants and the chosen instructor can be found in the next chapter.)

As there were a number of different results found in the studies I had read with respect to race, gender and age, I had hoped to determine any differences along these lines from my interviews. (Any adult who has told a joke to a teenager knows that the concept of humor is not always the same; it could be argued that this is also true for race and gender.) That being said, the interview population I ended up with did not have enough diversity across race, gender and age for me to analyze across these factors.

I have found that the interviews for my past class projects have always been enjoyable experiences. Glesne writes that "Researchers get more than data from their interviews. They speak of the exhilaration of conducting interviews, and of the rewards of meeting new people and of coming to understand some they thought they might not want to meet." (Glesne, 1992, p. 91)

I recorded (audiotape) each interview and later transcribed the interviews in their entirety. As a site for the interviews, I used common areas that were quiet enough to

successfully record the interviews yet at the same time where conducting my interviews would not be disruptive in the environment.

Classroom Observations

The classroom which I observed would accommodate 150 students with some 15 rows with ten seats each. Each row was higher than the row in front of it similar to stadium seating found in many cinemas. It was a very bland looking/decorated room with no decorations or pictures (the instructor later tries to address that shortcoming). The bottom, front teacher area had a large chalk board, a lectern, and a desk. The basic atmosphere of the room seemed to be old and depressing.

I observed three classes conducted by the instructor in an attempt to build a framework or context for the class which might be useful in which to place each of my respondents. I observed three times specifically watching for the use of humor as well as the teacher-student interaction. This might be considered similar to sighting a gun or adjusting an instrument, where I will look to see if I can determine the context and atmosphere of the classroom. I saw this as important to be used later when I reviewed the surveys and consider the interviews, placing them in the context of the classroom.

Analysis Approach

Gathering data, analyzing, coding it and coming up with findings can be a daunting task if one doesn't work through the tasks one at a time for even as one progresses, at times it can be difficult to recognize such progress.

Unlike the systematic progression of selecting a particular design and following the formulas for generating significance, the image of progress in qualitative research is more like one of those crazy clocks, the hour and minute hands of which revolve sometimes clockwise, sometimes counterclockwise, sometimes

together, and most often in opposition, so that movement forward is not comfortingly, logically visible. (Meloy, 2002, p. 145)

I collected data via the survey, interviews and class observations. I continued to search for information until I found nothing new was surfacing. Also while collecting these data, I continued to pore over my notes and observations to fully "steep myself in the information." (Meloy, 2002, p. 142) Glesne agrees when stating "Data analysis done simultaneously with data collection enables you to focus and shape the study as it proceeds." (Glesne, 1992, p. 127)

As I collected my data, I transcribed the key points of my interviews all of which had been audio-taped. My goal was to have my information in such a form that I would be able to work with it in the analysis and coding phase.

In coding my interview information, I first grouped all transcribed information for each interviewee together and uniquely color-coded these data. I then performed a keyword (phrase) search for the fifteen attributes/categories; for each of these data points, I built a section of cut-and-pasted, color-coded information. Upon reading through these sections, at times I found new topics and built new themes; an example of such a theme might be humor and spontaneity. In other cases, in looking at the other themes, I could collapse them into a single theme; an example of such a consolidation might be use of powerpoint presentations and drawing funny diagrams on the board.

I did this coding taking into consideration only what was presented by my data and ignored taking background information when it existed so as to have the data help me build my "story." This approach allowed me later to keep close to the "standard of inference" described by Foss who writes:

A good test whether you are bringing too much of your previous knowledge into your coding is to ask yourself if you would be able to explain to someone else how you came up with a particular code using only the excerpts in a transcript or article. This is the standard of reasonable inference. (Foss, 2007, p. 190)

All the while, of course, I kept my research question in mind so as to not stray too far from my task at hand which was to sort the various data points and classify them by category. After I was satisfied with the category contents, it was time to draw inferences from the data. I also knew that I had conducted enough interviews as during the final round of interviews, I found myself returning to discussions and concepts from previous interviews.

I looked for similarities and differences across my cases. This process included comparing and contrasting the responses from the surveys and interviews across topics such as

- definition of humor,
- student opinion of the efficacy of their professor,
- their opinion as to if/how humor affects the classroom learning environment and the retention of classroom material,
- differences in responses based on gender, age or ethnicity.

I also compared and contrasted responses taking into consideration responses from members from different colleges, e.g., did nursing students have a different view of humor from engineers? Do all students feel humor is a good thing for the classroom? I considered gender as much as I was able: Do females have a different definition of humor from males?

Based on this work, I built the results of my research in addressing my research question, "What role does humor in the higher education classroom play in student-perceived instructor effectiveness?" I present my analysis in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4 Leaning toward a Link between Laughing and Learning

If you were asked which of the following would provide the better metaphor for an efficient learning environment—CIRCUS or FILING CABINET—which would you choose? When one of the informants shared her view of learning with me and asked which I would prefer for a classroom environment, I have to admit she got me thinking. Naturally I rejected the circus environment (often-viewed metaphorically, potentially chaotic and out-of-control) and honed in on the seemingly organized and fact-packed filing cabinet. While seemingly an easy answer, don't reply too quickly on your own for there is more in play than one might consider at first blush—please read on.

This chapter provides details about the informants themselves which includes both students and the instructor. Analysis of the survey results, classroom observations and interviews are also contained in this chapter.

A. Information about the Informants—Students and Instructor

As noted before, an introductory history class was chosen for the domain from which to choose informants. After speaking to the class of eighty requesting that they consider participating in my study, I had nine students responding in the affirmative to participate in the survey, with five of that group agreeing to be interviewed. As noted before, nine of eighty was a low response rate, but as my respondents noted this was likely due to the non-volunteers feeling that their schedules could not accommodate additional activities.

In order to provide anonymity of these informants I used the following names: Steph, Michele, Marcia, Wilma and Lyndon participated in the survey as well as the

series of interviews. Paula, Rose, Winnie and Jean are names used for those informants who only participated in the survey. The classroom instructor will be referred to as “Doc.”

“The Students”

NAME	GENDER	Age	Major	Self-reported GPA
STEPH	F	19	Nursing	3.5
*				
MICHELLE	F	36	Education (post-grad)	3.97
*				
LYNDON	M	18	Accounting	3.5
*				
MARCIA	F	19	Nursing	2.9
*				
WILMA	F	18	Clinical Lab Science (Pre-Med)	N/A
*				
PAULA	F	18	Elem Education	N/A
**				
ROSE	F	21	Criminology	3.69
**				
WINNIE	F	21	Journalism	2.891
**				
JEAN	F	19	Exercise Physiology	3.5
**				

Table II---Details of the Students Involved in the Study
 (* participated in both survey and interview. ** participated in the survey only)

In summarizing, there were eight females and one male responding to the survey. Participating in the interviews were four females and one male. All students were white,

with all but two students having attended college before; this was the first semester for two students who naturally had no GPA's.

All but one student (Michelle) were in their late teens/early twenties, with that other student being 36 and the mother of two children. She was also the only married participant and was returning post-graduation to take education courses.

With respect to majors, this is the area of the most diversity. Four (Steph, Marcia, Wilma and Jean) were involved in medical-related majors (nursing, pre-med and exercise physiology), two (Michelle and Paula) in education, one (Winnie) in journalism, one (Rose) in criminology, and one (Lyndon) in accounting.

Other details include the fact that Lyndon is a member of one of the university's successful sports teams, while Wilma is pushing intensely to get a 4.0, believing her goal to be truly attainable.

“Doc”

Doc, an adjunct professor, was described by a number of students as Indiana Jones mixed with the absent-minded professor. Often dressed in a tie with a rolled-up long-sleeved shirt, he would use different voices while he lectured. He would look at his notes to keep on course, all the while maintaining eye contact with his students.

Doc earned his Ph.D. in history from a large Midwestern university. He is in his mid-to-late-50's, and has a slight build with what he calls a “bad hip.” His hair is relatively long and he uses a walking stick, like a golf club, to assist his walking; nevertheless, he frequently moves around in front of his classroom, typically with a smile on his face and varying volume when he speaks. More details are discussed below in the class observation section.

B. Analysis of the Survey

Keeping in mind that from the very beginning of this study humor was the focal point, the survey was used for a number of reasons. First, the views of the entire class would be useful to determine in quick measure the relative importance of humor as it relates to student perception of instructor efficacy. Of interest as well were the concepts of a learning-conducive environment, student interaction (and the ease in asking questions), and a fun classroom as all were shown in the extant literature to be clearly affected by/ associated with humor. The other items were used as a backdrop against which to compare humor and to determine its relative importance regarding instructor efficacy.

After having established the perceived importance of humor in the context of the classroom, the survey data were used to generate questions used in the interviews. As the planned approach taken during the interviews was to listen for the importance of humor and to let the discussion address a number of attributes without pushing the discussions toward humor, this assisted in having the student arrive at the importance of humor without being nudged in that direction.

Finally, it was of interest to see how the survey results would compare to the analysis of the interviews. In short, I wanted to explore in what ways the interview data might be different from the survey data.

There were three separate components in the survey itself:

1. Rating from 1 (the lowest or least important) to 5 (the highest or most important) traits/attributes/qualifications for teacher effectiveness. (Data in Table III and categorized in Table IV.)

2. Ranking from MOST to LEAST important the top five attributes from the list in (1) above. (Data in Table III and categorized in Table VI,) and
3. Providing a personal definition of “humor” (Appendix A)

Table III which follows on the next page contains the responses for the survey. (Please refer to Appendix B for the survey). The key to the columnar abbreviations can be found in Table IV. For example, “KNOWL” is the symbol for “Subject Matter Knowledge.”)

1. Rating the Traits/Attributes/Qualifications of a Teacher

In considering how the students deemed the importance of the various traits, the overall mean rating of each attribute is calculated by totaling the number assigned for each topic by each student and dividing by the total number of respondents; for example, in obtaining data from Table III, the topic “humor” had two five’s, two four’s, and five three’s for a total “33;” divided by the number of respondents (“9”) would give a score of 3.67. This mean value by itself has meaning **only** that it gives an overall ranking among the various topics. Using this calculus, Subject Matter Knowledge was rated as most important. Humor was rated a tie for fifth, and Race was rated last. It should be noted again that these numbers only have a meaning as a device to rank the attributes. (Please refer to Table IV for more details.)

In looking at these data after conducting the interviews, the interviews brought out implications many of which did not match with the analysis above. For example, the highest ranking topic in the survey, Subject Matter Knowledge, while important in the interviews did not seem to be that important. Subject Matter Knowledge

(1) having a high ranking, on the other hand, shouldn't be a surprise as this is nearly the only "requirement" for higher education instructors. A surprise was Teacher Possesses Advanced Degree (12) which could logically be linked to Subject Matter Knowledge was several steps down the list. Similarly, but in a "different direction" the topic, a "Fun" Classroom, (10) was slightly below the middle of the pack, but was indicated via the interviews to be higher in importance.

Three topics, Environment Conducive for Learning (2), Answering Questions/Interaction with Students (4), and Sense of Humor, (5) were ranked in the top grouping in the survey and also judged similarly during the interviews. The high ranking of Environment (2) in this component of the survey again is no revelation since, as pointed out in the literature section above, it was considered to have a significant impact on learning and teacher efficacy. Sense of Humor (5) being highly regarded in the survey also closely shadows the rank of Environment (2) agreeing with both the literature position and interview results linking Humor (5) with a successful learning environment (2). Traits such as teacher gender (14), teacher race (15) and teacher age (13) were ranked by far the least important.

NAME	Age	Race	Sex	DEG	DISC	KNOWL	HUMOR	Handouts	INTER	TESTS	GRADES	HWWORK	DIFF	FUN?	ENV
STEPH	1	1	1	3	5	5	4	3	4	4	4	4	3	4	5
					TWO	ONE	FIVE		FOUR						THREE
MICHELL	1	1	1	5	5	5	3	3	4	4	4	3	3	2	5
				TWO	FOUR	THREE			ONE						FIVE
LYNDON	1	1	1	2	4	5	3	3	4	3	3	2	3	4	5
					FOUR	TWO			THREE					FIVE	ONE
MARCIA	1	1	1	4	5	5	3	5	4	4		4	4	4	4
						TWO	ONE				THREE			FIVE	FOUR
WILMA	2	1	1	2	5	5	5	4	5	5	4	4	4	3	5
					FOUR	TWO	FIVE		ONE						THREE
PAULA	2	1	1	2	4	5	5	5	5	4	5	4	5	5	5
						TWO	THREE		ONE					FIVE	FOUR
ROSE	1	1	2	2	5	5	3	4	4	3	3	2	3	2	5
					THREE	ONE		FIVE	FOUR						TWO
WINNIE	2	1	3	2	3	5	4	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	4
					FIVE	ONE	THREE	FOUR							TWO
JEAN	2	1	1	4	4	5	3	2	5	3	4	2	3	3	4
						TWO			ONE	FOUR	FIVE				THREE

Table III Individual Rating (“1” highest to “5” lowest) and Ranking (“ONE” highest to “FIVE” lowest) of Teacher Traits

Details of the “numeric importance” of each topic follow:

TOPIC	“IMPORTANCE”	RANK
Subject Matter Knowledge (KNOWL)	5.00	1
Environment Conducive for Learning (ENV)	4.67	2
Discipline/Classroom Management (DISC)	4.44	3
Answering Questions/Interaction with Students (INTER)	4.22	4
Sense of Humor (HUMOR)	3.67	5 (tied)
Test Construction (TESTS)	3.67	5 (tied)
Handout Materials (Amount/Quality) (Handouts)	3.56	7
Difficulty of Classroom Material (DIFF)	3.44	8
Grading (GRADES)	3.33	9
A "Fun" Classroom (FUN?)	3.22	10
Homework Assignments (Number/Difficulty) (HWOR)	3.11	11
Teacher Possesses Advanced Degree (DEG)	2.89	12
Teacher Age (AGE)	1.44	13
Teacher Gender (SEX)	1.33	14
Teacher Race (RACE)	1.00	15

Table IV Overall Mean Respondent Ratings of Teacher Attributes
 (“1” least important to “5” most important)

If only survey results had been used, I would have inferred that Subject Matter (1) was the most important trait for an effective classroom. During the interviews, however, while Subject Matter (1) was indeed an important attribute, analyzing the interviews pointed out that Humor (5) was at least equally important as Subject Matter. The emergence of differences in student responses between the survey and interview points out the importance of exploring thinking in depth. Using both survey and interview data, in short, provide for a richer analysis than using a single data collection strategy.

2. Ranking from Most to Least Important--Their Top Five Attributes

While the previous survey question ranked all of the topics in numeric order (“1” being most important, “5” least important), I thought it would be informative to ask the informants to choose and rank only their top five attributes. The top five attributes for each of the respondents (e.g. ONE, TWO, etc., where ONE is most important and FIVE is least) are displayed in Table III and Table IV. These attributes are ranked from top (1) to bottom (10), taking into consideration that there were ten attributes from which to choose. (Please note, these ONE, TWO, THREE, etc. individual rankings can be seen in Table V).

Similar to my defining “importance” for the rating the traits/attributes/qualifications of a teacher, the importance for ranking the top five attributes was determined as well. Again, this numeric result has no value on its own other than assisting in ranking the attributes.

First of all, if an attribute was not in any of the top five lists, it was not considered. The importance of the remaining attributes was then calculated by

- a. Assigning numeric values to each of the rankings, e.g., ONE was assigned 1, TWO was assigned 2 and so on.
- b. If an attribute was not selected by a specific informant, yet assigned a value by another informant, a non-response was assigned the numeric value of 6
- c. The numeric assignments were totaled and divided by 9 (the number of informants). This result was the “importance” of the attribute.

For example in looking at FUN there are six non-responses (or $6 \times 6=36$) and three FIVES (or $3 \times 5=15$), giving FUN a (ranking only) score of 51.

Similar to the comparison of the survey component above and the interviews, only three respondents ranked the topic, Subject Matter Knowledge (1), as most important, while the trait, Answering Questions/Interaction with Students (2), had four “most important” votes while it came in “fourth place” just before the topic, Humor (5). All of that being said, the attribute, Subject Matter Knowledge (1), along with Environment Conducive for Learning (2), were in everyone’s top five. While the topic of most interest to me, Humor (5), fell in the middle of the proverbial pack, it was deemed more important during the interviews and highly related to the other topics such as learning environment and fun. In considering why this might be the case, what comes to mind first is that the interviews may have brought out what the students were actually thinking, (the “voice” of the student) rather than what a survey was able to elicit.

TOPIC	RANK
Subject Matter Knowledge	1
Environment Conducive for Learning	2 (tie)
Answering Questions/Interaction with Students	2 (tie)
Discipline/Classroom Management	4
Sense of Humor	5
Grading	6 (tie)
Teacher Possesses Advanced Degree	6 (tie)
A "Fun" Classroom	8 (tie)
Handout Materials (Amount/Quality)	8 (tie)
Test Construction	10

Table V Pick top five attributes of a teacher and rank them

Comparing the Two Survey Measures

In looking at the similarities and differences between the two survey measures, (Table VI), all topics seemed to align similarly. None of the topics Difficulty of Classroom Material, Homework Assignments (Number/Difficulty), Teacher Age, Teacher Gender and Teacher Race were picked by any of the respondents in their top five, reinforcing their lack of importance as determined in the interviews as well. Grading was rated (9) and (6) respectively, Fun Classroom was rated (10) and (8) respectively, and Test Construction, rated (6) and (10) respectively. Even though the rankings were not exactly the same, the two tables illustrate that the traits remained in the general area (top, middle, and bottom) of the rankings.

Using the Survey Results

As noted before, results from the surveys were used to help build the questions for the initial interviews. After the interviews were conducted, the analysis of the interviews was compared and contrasted with the survey results to determine similarities, differences. In performing this review of the results of the survey and interviews, the list of topics needed to be changed. Topics such as Homework Assignments, Difficulty of Classroom Material, Test Construction and Grading were not considered and in a sense “deleted” from further analysis. Subject Matter Knowledge became consolidated into the former title with Teacher Possesses Advanced Degree. Answering Questions/Interaction with Students and Environment Conducive for Learning were merged as well. The concept of “Favorite Teacher” was added and associated with Teacher Effectiveness.

<u>TOPIC</u>	<u>RATE ALL 14 ATTRIBUTES</u>	<u>PICK 5 AND RANK</u>
Subject Matter Knowledge	1	1
Environment Conducive for Learning	2	2 (tie)
Answering Questions/Interaction with Students	4	2 (tie)
Discipline/Classroom Management	3	4
Sense of Humor	5	5
Grading	9	6 (tie)
Teacher Possesses Advanced Degree	12	6 (tie)
A "Fun" Classroom	10	8 (tie)
Handout Materials (Amount/Quality)	7	8 (tie)
Test Construction	6	10
Difficulty of Classroom Material	8	N/A
Homework Assignments (Number/Difficulty)	11	N/A
Teacher Age	13	N/A
Teacher Gender	14	N/A
Teacher Race	15	N/A

Table VI. The top five attributes for a teacher—COMPARISON

There were a number of topics considered in Chapter 3 that resulted from the review of extant literature. These topics along with those concepts and ideas that came out of the survey and interviews noted above became the inventory of areas to consider. In further consideration of these themes and considering the interdependencies and associations, my catalog of themes to consider became:

- A. Teacher Efficacy
 - a. Student concept of instructor effectiveness—"favorite" teachers
 - b. The impact humor has on comprehension and retention of information
- B. Environment
 - a. What would constitute the better classroom environment
 - b. Learning-Conducive Environment
 - c. Humor and discipline in the classroom
- C. Humor

- a. The effects determined by different types of humor
- b. Humor and spontaneity
- c. Relevance of humor
- d. Gender and humor
- e. Humor not the panacea

These themes will also be used as a guideline for the interview analysis below.

3. Individual Definitions of “Humor”

In the literature review above, it was shown that a definition of humor can be elusive for a number of reasons...one main reason may be the concept of SENSE of humor—and that a single definition does not exist. Personal connotation defies a true denotative definition.

The question “How would you define the term “humor” in a sentence or two,” while seemingly simple is relatively difficult to answer. As I noted above in this document, even the extant literature has no common definition. Defining a term with which everyone is familiar and might be considered to be “common knowledge” can be difficult as all are more cognizant of the connotation rather than the denotation of the term.

In surveying the definitions there were similarities but differences nevertheless as well. Words such as “laugh”/“laughter,” “joke,” “fun” and “comical” were scattered throughout the definitions. Other concepts such as “a way to relax,” “a connection,” “bring a livelihood to conversations,” “I am more likely to learn” while being not majority opinions, did seem to match up well with what was discussed in the interviews. Humor in the interviews was discussed as being more than laughing and joke-telling,

being linked to a successful learning environment as was done in the extant literature. (Each of the definitions of humor can be found in the Appendix A for this document.)

It is the differences that worry me. A number of quantitative studies which via surveys asked about “humor” of a group of respondents were cited above. Due to the attributes of a quantitative study (singular definitions, etc.), which were noted above, these respondents may not have had the same definition or potentially even the same connotation of humor; consequently, while all queries had identical wording, they were highly likely asking different questions depending on the person’s definition.

To support this thought of having multiple views of humor in play for a single survey, one need not look any further than the variety of definitions used by the authors I cited in the literature review section. Aboudan refers to humor as “humoristic remarks” (Aboudan, 2009, p. 2), while Buckman defines humor as “anything people say or do that is perceived as funny and tends to make other people laugh.” (Buckman, 2010, p. 9) Sheppard (2002), Williams (2001) are similar-minded linking humor to “funny” and laughter. On the other hand, Smuts (2009) pointed out that John Dewey did not link humor and laughter, while Bostina-Bratu (2007) and Provine (2000) associated laughter with social relationships and not humor.

The definitions in Appendix A from the participants in this study have a variety of ideas relating to humor as well such as linking humor to laughing, to being funny to lightheartedness and looking at events in an alternative manner. One can conclude that if the authors studying humor as well as my informants have such a disparate view of humor, those taking the surveys will similarly not be in agreement.

D. Analysis from Classroom Observations

I visited Doc's classroom three times, taking notes each time. (Much of what is noted below comes from those notes.) At each of the times I visited Doc showed up a few minutes late. At first I thought this was not a good thing, I guess, based on my somewhat proverbial "Germanic" background of "lateness detracts from greatness;" that being said, his timing ended up working out to be a great segue to his icebreaking phase, getting the class to settle down and mentally be prepared for class. Such a task of getting the class ready to go is important if you have over 80 students in the same room with you and your goal is to teach them history!

When he would start up the class, he would make comments such as

"Good morning again! Any good stories to share?"

"Today we have lots to do!"

"I think we should stay to 11:15 today!" (Class ends at 10:45) "Just kidding!"

"You quieted down on your own. Thank you."

As part of his classroom management, Doc started the first class meeting with the DO's and DON'T's of his classroom.

DO's included:

Show up

OK to eat—bring food and share

while DON'T's included:

Read papers noticeably

Sleep noticeably—with eyes open OK

Take calls in class

Velcroing (the act of closing binders, notebooks, etc. with Velcro—making a distinct noise (i.e., Velcroing))

In watching and listening (and as confirmed by my interview participants), Doc brought stories to class, making history real and more than just a group of facts. He brought connections to history, linking what is presently relevant to what happened in the past. He stated that history matters because life matters---and history can make you angry—Bess Truman won't make you mad, but the Kent State shootings will make you angry—hearing about the 146 who died in the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire with the owners not being held responsible will make you livid!

Above and beyond his mandate to teach history, Doc stated, “I care a great deal about how you write. I want you to leave this university as a good writer.” During one visit he discussed rewrites and their impact not only on the class grade but also on improving their writing skills. He seemed to really care for his students, wanting to pass on his passion of history to them, but to make them better writers at the same time.

Other examples of Doc's approach to teaching history include:

1. He thought the classroom was drab and asked the class to bring in posters, fake flowers or a palm tree to dress up the place. (A poster and plastic flowers did appear later.)
2. In discussing the Pullman strike, he described that Pullman was so despised, that when he died his body was buried under a ton of concrete to protect the integrity of his corpse.
3. At the beginning of class he had a Halloween candy contest with questions such as:
 - i. The height of Mt. Everest
 - ii. Hitler's birthday
4. In explaining the Korean conflict, he drew a “map” of Korea, which he pointed out looked more like Indiana---but he then “seriously” showed that the communists were pushed back, almost like a “tube of toothpaste.” (The message was received by the students.)

5. With an eye for irony he talked about Ed Sullivan (whom he called a “living corpse”) stating that Elvis Presley was a “good boy” even though they didn’t want to show more of Elvis than from the waist up as they didn’t want to shock the audience.
6. Keeping the eye on Elvis and irony, Doc showed a picture of Elvis being presented an honorary drug enforcement document by Richard Nixon. (Of course, Doc added the fact how Elvis DID die of a drug overdose)
7. When talking about the post-war years, he pointed out that, via television, marketing showed us how bad breath and dandruff could ruin our lives, making us lose our jobs and our wives.
8. How FDR died while getting a portrait painted for his mistress’s mother
9. How Molotov had a first name that couldn’t be pronounced, was called a liar by Truman, and how he had a bomb named after him.
10. Before it was a music group, U2 was a spy plane, one of which, piloted by Francis Gary Powers for the U.S. was shot down by the Russians. Powers later died in a traffic helicopter accident in San Diego.
11. What “duck and cover” meant in A-Bomb drills and how he never understood why the boys were instructed to shield the girls in the hall with their bodies.

While this list may seem to be a little long, please remember that they are the result of only classroom observations; the point to be taken is that they are indicative of the class atmosphere and environment. More details about Doc’s approach to teaching and his (obvious) use of humor will be discussed in the interview section. Looking back, I only wish I had had Doc for my college history classes.

D Interview Analysis

As discussed above, I chose to include a qualitative approach for a number of reasons, the most important the most important being that I found no studies that interrogated the student themselves as to how they feel about humor in the classroom and its effect, in their opinion, on the effectiveness of their professors.

As noted in the above section, “Using the Survey Results,” a thematic list was constructed using topics considered in Chapter 3 that resulted from the review of extant literature along with those concepts and ideas that came out of the survey and interviews. Those themes along with the interdependencies and associations (i.e., how some topics should be grouped together, while others become subheadings to a major heading) are the bases of how the findings will be organized; again, this thematic list is:

- A. Teacher Efficacy
 - i. Student concept of instructor effectiveness—“favorite” teachers
 - ii. The impact humor has on comprehension and retention of information
- B. Environment
 - i. What would constitute the better classroom environment
 - ii. Learning-Conducive Environment
 - iii. Humor and discipline in the classroom
- C. Humor
 - i. The effects determined by different types of humor
 - ii. Humor and spontaneity
 - iii. Relevance of humor
 - iv. Gender and humor
 - v. Humor not the panacea
- A. Teacher Efficacy

- i. Student Concept of Instructor Effectiveness—“Favorite” Teachers

Returning to my research question, “What role does humor in the higher education classroom play in student-perceived instructor effectiveness?” before continuing deeper into the findings, it is interesting to note how two of the interviewees looked at teacher effectiveness. Lyndon offered the view that an effective instructor not only gets the student interested in the subject matter at hand, but has them leaving the class understanding more about the subject by the end of the class:

I think an effective teacher is someone who can bring in a student who is either interested or not interested in a subject ...and help them understand it more, help them understand it better. And even if a student comes in knowing 90% of the

subject matter or 0%, I think what an effective teacher does is progresses them along the way, helps them understand more of the subject, even if they don't know everything. So if you come in knowing or not knowing anything and leave knowing half the stuff, I think that's an effective teacher. I think if you come in knowing half the stuff and leave knowing 75%, I think that's an effective teacher because over the term of the semester or however long the class is, you've progressed and he or she has helped you learn more about the subject, so I think that's an effective teacher.

Wilma was highly simplistic in her approach to an effective teacher when she stated, "Well if I enjoy a teacher, I am more likely to want to learn in that class."

On the other hand, Michele posits the idea that her time is being invested in the class, with a key outcome being her grade. A "bad class" was deemed to be a waste of her time. "Ineffective" would include being disorganized. "I find it stressful to put my grade in the hands of somebody that is disorganized, and off topic. Because you don't know should you be sucking up, or like did you do well on the test...I don't like that."

While considering efficacy, one could quite naturally extend that concept to include one's favorite teacher, i.e., that memorable instructor in whose class you both enjoyed and learned. Wilma linked humor to her favorite teachers when she stated, "My favorite teachers definitely had a good sense of humor and were really interactive and my favorite teachers were ones that I really connect to, like yeah (Doc) is cool and everything."

Michelle, responded somewhat self-contradictorily when she noted that she could not think of any of her favorite teachers who didn't have any humor, yet when asked about common traits about her favorite teachers, she pointed out,

I don't think about sense of humor, I think about serious, organized... Well I am not saying that they didn't have a sense of humor, but they were more on task ... the fact that I remember about them was that they were on task, not drifting."

She did note that she did enjoy Doc's class and liked "the way he presented stuff and he had a sense of humor."

Marcia stated that she understands that being well grounded in the subject matter area is important, but

students remember the teachers that make jokes, students remember the teachers that have fun in their classes, and like, you can still get the material, you don't have to do stupid stuff all of the time, you maybe crack a joke here and there and you relate to the people you're teaching to, you become a kid's favorite teacher they talk about you all the time.

Teacher efficacy and teachers favorably-remembered are linked to their knowledge of the subject matter, in some cases being focused, but all students stressed the possession of a sense of humor; but, how much "clowning around" is required—but how does this impact learning—and could learning be considered to be a component of teacher efficacy?

ii. The Impact Humor Has on Comprehension and Retention of Information

In considering teacher efficacy, it would not be difficult to build the case that if a student learns, the teacher is efficacious; of course, measuring that learning can be problematic. Thus we can ask directly, How does humor help improve learning and consequently teacher efficacy?

Deiter (1998) writes that “one main reason for using humor in the classroom is to improve student learning...My own surveys of students indicate they tend to agree they are more likely to remember material if it is presented with humor.” Royse (2001) believes that this may occur since boredom is being reduced by the utilization of humor.

Wilma points out that

I don't want to go to a class that is a drag where the professor just sits there and monotonizes through class and just talks, there has to be some kind of variety that keeps it interesting otherwise I am going to zone out and just write down what is on the screen rather than listen to what they are saying, which then doesn't make me learn it as well.

Linking humor to learning, Wilma continues talking about the

different learning styles and there is a difference in taking notes and making notes so that when there is humor for me, then I can like actually interact with the notes that I am taking and try to understand as I go rather than just writing down and being like a robot.

Wilma then talks about a biology teacher she had in the past that took a popular Christmas song about the days of Christmas and put it together with the characteristics of a fly. She can still remember those fly characteristics based on the humor and the song approach. (Not being well versed in biology, I was not able to verify the veracity of the fly characteristics, but I do have to admit she did remember them as evidenced by her singing that song.)

Steph links humor, stress reduction and learning when she points out that if she is more relaxed in a class she will be able to retain the information longer. Lyndon continues that thought noting that “I think if a teacher provides a nice environment for learning, it helps the student learn the subject matter better.”

The interviews showed that the students linked “instructor efficacy” to concepts such as knowledge of the subject matter, improvement in student learning as well as longer retention of material. The informants noted that the instructor’s use of humor helped reduce stress and help build a learning-conducive environment. Those teachers who were labeled as “favorite teachers” by the informants all used humor in their classroom; considering the favorite teacher to be an efficacious instructor, the informants were strongly linking humor to classroom efficacy.

The topic of reducing stress and building a nice environment for learning moves us into our next group of topics, environment.

B. Environment

i. What Would Constitute the Better Classroom Environment: A Circus or a Filing Cabinet?

The environment of a classroom has many components including the physical room, the temperature and lighting, the white board in front, the instructor’s lectern, and on. The environment we are considering in this study is the atmosphere or feeling that the student (and instructor) has. Is there a relaxed or tense mood in the room? Can students ask questions? Do the students have to be prepared to be called on with a subject-matter question?

When one thinks of a circus, concepts such as chaos, disorganization, audio/visual overload and little being truly accomplished all might come to mind; we all have heard, when finding ourselves in a situation abounding with confusion, someone mutter “What a

circus!” On the other hand, a filing cabinet is ordered and packed with information. All of that being said, a circus is exciting and a filing cabinet---well, is relatively boring!

During one interview with Marcia, (totally on her own and new to me, I have to admit, I had not thought of, or even heard of, the idea of a circus and filing cabinet as classroom metaphors) she presented her own seemingly original view of these two concepts. She described how they might relate to the classroom, learning and the connections made between the subject matter and things more personal:

...sometimes you'll write something down, like what the history teacher said, about some sort of situation, you can put on a side note where you have a personal situation that is kind of similar, or something like that. You add little personal touches to your notes which help (you) to retain the information. It's kind of like a filing cabinet versus something I would say like more like a circus. So the filing cabinet is something like information from school, like stuff that you have to memorize, stuff that you've learned and it goes into a certain place. But it's cold on the outside. It can sit by itself. And you can kind of push it to the back, or in the corner and nobody really knows that it is there vs. the circus, where everything is happy, everybody is talking to everybody. There's a connection between the clown that is dancing on the pogo stick, and the guy who is selling the huge stuffed animals for throwing a ring on a little bottle. Like there is more of a group cohesiveness, you can connect the craziness, and it's all kind of the balloons, and the guy selling the popcorn, it's kind of there. In the filing cabinet, is (are) most of the notes that you are taking vs. adding all these little personal touches which is the circus. Every time you go to the circus, everybody has a personal experience. So the connections are kind of haphazard, and all over the place. It doesn't look there is much order to anything, but, at the same time there is. There is an order. Things are connected... Things are connected to each other, and it works cohesively. And so that is the way that I think, there are really two different ways to memorize things, keep things in your brain, for a certain period of time... So you have a filing cabinet, which is things you have to know. Things like people, or dates. For example, in [some classes]... you have to know various ... [facts], so I have to know it. So you open it up and it's got a file, like a note card, it's got all this stuff, but it is blocking the way. It's pretty much like that is it, and then I can put it back, and it doesn't really have any other place inside my head.

Whereas, for history, like the light bulb example. Thomas Edison created the light bulb, well cool. But I remember when I was a kid, and I electrocuted myself, or my sister put a Christmas light in her mouth and it light up for a second. And I make personal connections to it, and it causes it to have more of an assignment, so I'll remember it longer, because it's like Thomas Edison has the light bulb, or I remember that one time for Christmas. You have certain little memories, certain little instances that have occurred to you personally.

Well I've definitely heard of the filing cabinet. It is definitely what is in your brain. How do you keep things? Because I know that the filing cabinet works. But at the same time, I also know that, in my head, I have a filing cabinet, like ... [class one], and another filing cabinet that says... [class two]. Whereas for history, I have kind of like the circus going off in my head. Granted, not everything will have a personal effect, personalized situation, something that I can connect it to that will help me remember it longer. Sometimes, I'll have a circus for history, but at the same time, I'll also have a smaller filing cabinet for things that I need to know, that I can't make a personal situation.

...sometimes the connection is so thin, or in such a roundabout way, it's so roundabout that it doesn't really make sense, but it's so roundabout that you're actually going to remember it.

... you're definitely going to remember the circus. If you go to the circus, you're going to remember something strange that happened that happened at the circus vs. if you work in an office and you have to put stuff in filing cabinets all day.

While Marcia does personally use both mental approaches to learning (circus and filing cabinet), she believed the circus (linked to a class with humor or fun) was the more effective. In asking the other respondents about the concept of "Circus vs. Filing Cabinet" as examples of learning environments, the initial response was that the circus would provide little gain.

Wilma noted that "I would assume like the circus is like everyone is doing their own thing, nothing like focused, but like in a filing cabinet you are so organized and

everything like flows so then it is really easy to get through the class if everyone is like paying attention in the same spot, but like a circus is everything, like all over the place.”

Lyndon takes the circus metaphor and applies it to a history class (not Doc's):

I could see how it could be a circus just because I would assume a circus would be complete chaos thing—that's what I'm thinking of a circus, with multiple acts going on at the same time so he could be talking about the Korean war and then all of a sudden jump back to the Civil War or talking about just two completely different things back to back and you're taking notes and writing everything down but you're thinking to yourself what what's the connection?

Michelle stated a similar idea, but also introduced the concept that the circus is more entertaining and amusing than a filing cabinet and could be considered to be the in vogue teacher approach:

Ignoring the animal rights issues, circus just sounds like such an over the top, comical, connotation. But it's like that is the new thing, to be entertaining, you can't just teach, you have to entertain, you have to be amusing...it makes you a better teacher. But in time it puts all the pressure on you as the teacher rather than the student. At some point you [the students] have to pay attention and not sleep in class.

In a sense Michelle reminds us that while a teacher should continue to hone his/her instructing skills, there is indeed a level of responsibility held by the student as well. At the same time, Michelle, like the others, links the concept of circus to amusement/humor.

While this is an interesting concept, one must be careful of developing a binary view of the classroom---a class could be like a circus or like a filing cabinet; but why not a combination? Aren't these concepts merely ends of a spectrum and a classroom could be a blend of both? A teacher is not just “funny” or “not funny;” he could be one or the other depending on what is going on in the class at any point in time.

Much like considering the concept of humor, defining the “circus” environment is a challenge, but in considering the connotations presented to us by Marcia above, we could consider attributes such as energetic, not single-threaded (e.g., having only a powerpoint being read), and entertaining (which might be considered by some to be problematic approaching the “Sage on the Stage” approach to education) being led by the ringmaster (teacher) who is engaging, enthusiastic and humorous at times.

After further discussion with the informants of what Marcia’s concept of what a circus was, both Steph (“I guess I really didn’t think about that, I think circus is like everywhere, all over the place, I never think of organized”) and Michelle (“Well I actually have a circus and I have a filing cabinet and I like the circus a lot better”) changed their vote from filing cabinet to circus. Lyndon also changed to a pro-“circus” position as well.

While seemingly off the wall, Marcia’s circus idea and as supported by the rest of the informants, showed how effectively humor helps improve the classroom environment by making it “easier” to learn—a learning-conducive environment, addressed in the next section. It should be noted that applying the concept of full disclosure, that none of the informants, associated teachers or instructors were pro-clowns even though they did prefer the circus concept.

ii. Learning-Conducive Environment

A learning environment is so very important for the classroom—sounding like a truism this conceptual link to humor was validated by the Pedde study (discussed in the literature section above) which connected humor to building a caring environment which

in turn improved learning. Garner stated that the “use of humor as a pedagogical tool has been shown to reduce classroom anxiety, create a more positive atmosphere, as well as facilitate the learning process. (Garner, 2005, p. 2)

Having an environment conducive to learning scored high in both ways of ranking the attributes (“list all attributes in order of importance” and “picking the top five and ranking them”). In the interviews, the informants discussed similar ideas. Lyndon tells us that “I think if a teacher provides a nice environment for learning, it helps the student learn the subject matter better because without that environment the student is not going to pay attention...he is not going to want to listen to the teacher if he doesn’t have that special environment.”

How does a teacher build such a learning-conducive environment? Lyndon continues, starting with the concept of teacher enthusiasm.

That enthusiasm really brings the subject matter to life because if they have that enthusiasm and you’re taking that class, why not have that same enthusiasm (that they have? Why not want to learn it and do what they are doing? Why not want to be able to understand it even more? That enthusiasm really brings the subject matter to life ... in this teaching environment.

Wilma talked about Doc’s classroom and how he builds a learning environment when she opines,

Well I like (Doc), his little funny quips, in the middle of his like long string of words, and it just lightens it up and (gives us) a point to focus on. You can kind of break up the information instead of just a long string and kind of compartmentalize...but then having the little funny things in the middle, is “like OH, click on your brain it’s time to learn!

Lyndon continues (going beyond his “enthusiasm” comment) that

I think without that humor it’s kind of like a dry class it’s kind of, you know, why am I here? This is so boring. I think that humor, it adds a bit of extra spice to it, it adds a little more interesting about it. The teacher’s going to make funny jokes or have a sense of humor on the subject matter you’re going to be more inclined to

go to class because you're going to be more interested, you're going to want to see if the teacher's going to do something that will make you really laugh or something. I mean it does have a lot to do with that (building a learning) environment.

Marcia mentioned during the interviews how Doc would provide interesting tidbits and facts in a humorous way and while “you can really impress people with these factoids,” you built personal connections to the material at hand. She continued to mention that she will always remember (from Doc's history class) the strikes at Pullman and how Mr. Pullman had to be buried under feet of concrete thereafter to protect his corpse!

Returning to Lyndon's thoughts, we hear that in Doc's class it's more than being presented with facts. “You can actually throw in like someone's personal experiences or actual knowledge about it instead of just fact, not just like the what but the how, the why. I think that is also important than just the what.”

Lyndon then continues to present his own metaphor on learning (similar to the circus and filing cabinet above.)

I think that (humor) helps the students learn and helps the students remember because I compare learning to like learning song lyrics all the time. Kids can learn the song lyrics after listening to a song three or four times, but they will read a passage in a book four or five times and they won't remember it. So I think with that humor...that makes it interesting is like the song lyrics. If they like the song they are going to remember it, if they like what they are learning they are going to remember it better.

So we now have two metaphors between which to choose—the circus and filing cabinet or learning song lyrics. Funny to me, however, is the fact that I really am not convinced that today's songs even have lyrics—but I wander from the path. (The topic of wandering minds will be covered soon.)

Wilma gives an example of a NON-learning conducive environment when she described a lecture hall with the lights out and having the instructor reading every word of her PowerPoint to the class. “I remember looking up at the PowerPoint and then I remember everyone packing up; there’s about a twenty minute gap in there where I don’t remember anything and I was just taking notes.”

Yes, the interviewees did agree that humor played an important role in building the learning environment. Michele points out that if a teacher jokes, he or she is going to be jovial and they “are setting a mode of the class.” This atmosphere can start as class itself begins. Wilma notes that “when you walk into the classroom, there’s so much going on, then all of a sudden the lecture starts and you’re supposed to shut it all out. Laughter helps me ... focus on what is in front of me instead of worrying about the test I have next hour or something like that.”

All of that being said, is it possible for a learning-conducive environment to exist without humor? Lyndon posits in a qualified affirmative response when he says “I think there are some classes where you can have that learning environment without humor, but I don’t think it will be as interesting of a learning environment”.

Learning-Conducive Environment without Humor?

Is it possible to be an effective instructor without humor? Wilma addresses this question when she notes,

For sure, I think you can...for example, my English teacher doesn’t really do much to make us laugh, but certain things that we’ll do will make us laugh, she stumbles on a word, it’s not like we’re trying to make fun of her, it’s just –she’s a really open person and that works...It’s like we were talking about technology, some link wasn’t working and she got mad at her computer, that was funny but we were still paying attention to what was going on.

When talking about a successful classroom without humor, Michelle pondered,

I don't know, that's a good question. I mean I had a really serious professor, really, I mean he would see things oddly and he would laugh or we would see things different from him and we would laugh so that there was humor there, but I don't think anyone would say that he was humorous. He was, I don't know?

Arriving at a more definite answer, Marcia still pointed out the power of humor but continued positing,

I think the humor is the quickest and easiest path to making, and kind of easing the tension in the room, and having good atmosphere, and getting your point across. And, at the same time, even if they don't have humor, they're not serious, they're not mean, they include the relevance factor, but they need to have a nice blend between the two. My study style, if you can't relate it to what I have to do later in life, or if you're not going to make any connection to me, or to my general peers, or where I'm at or something like that, then all it is a little piece of information that is going to go in the filing cabinet, then I'm not going to look at it again.

Interesting—without humor it's a filing cabinet but NO circus (written with tongue firmly in cheek!) While reiterating the idea that the circus and filing cabinet are ends of a spectrum and not the only manifestation of humor in the classroom, all informants agreed that while a student CAN learn in a classroom without humor, it would be harder for them and they would not retain the information as long.

If a classroom is not interesting, all of the informants felt that it will be easy to lose focus, not pay attention or the dreaded “zoning out” process.

Entering the DMZ (De-Mentalized Zone)!

When I asked Wilma if she “zoned-out” in Doc’s class she said, “because of his pace and because of the information, no, I am usually just thinking about everything he is saying and how bad my hand hurts from writing so fast.” In talking about another teacher, Wilma continues that “She’s not very funny...every once in a while a funny thing will happen but then I tend to zone out more in (her class) than in history...Sometimes I can’t focus on her because she’s like getting boring—it’s time to say something funny—she has sort of a monotone voice.”

Michelle tells about a situation that one of her friends experienced, where her friend mentally strayed during a class and then heard laughing in the classroom around her. She perked up and wondered what she had missed. Thereafter she tried to stay more focused so as to not miss out on anything again. Wilma agreed with Michelle that using humor is almost like tricking students to pay attention, inducing them to want to listen so they aren’t missing something fun or interesting.

Doc must have figured how to keep his students out of the DMZ. The various respondents agreed that Doc’s using humor from time to time, all the while staying focused and having the factoids thrown in there every once in a while, kept them from zoning out, plus with his pace, the time went quickly, the students enjoyed the class and learned as well.

In a similar vein, Steph explains that

I start out really good, and then fade away. If I study by myself, it would be like sitting in the class for me. So it’s like I start out, and I’m paying attention, and understanding it, and eventually, my mind is wandering, and I’m thinking about other things.” So how can the teacher and learning environment help to keep her focused? “I don’t think that teachers have to be entertainers, I mean I am easily distracted sometimes, or like I have a problem sitting still for a very long time, I

get antsy, I am like I have got keep moving, so if you are like, like if you can't entertain me and I get really bored in class then it's like I don't even want to go I am so bored sitting there.

Marcia opines that to help students stay focused, teachers “really need to get (their) students a little more interested, and this is one way, humor is a really big connection across all fields.” Teachers need to “add a little more substance so that the kids want to be there rather than like being oh, here we go!”

OK to Ask Questions? A More Level Playing Field

In the literature review, the concept of the relief theory of humor discussed with Freud and Spencer seeing the usefulness of humor being able to release energy generated by repression. If we were to change the word from “repression” to “stress” again we would find a topic agreed upon by the interviewees.

Michelle talked about how Doc keeps the class entertained and relaxed and comfortable enough to ask questions. (This feeling comfortable to ask questions could be viewed as a result of the aforementioned learning-conducive environment.) A main challenge in Doc's class is that there are over 80 students and the setting doesn't lend itself to question-and-answer due to the room layout/construct, the lecture approach being taken and the number of students. Yet, they all felt they could ask a question of Doc, most likely after class or during office hours rather than in front of so many people.

Continuing with that thought whether she felt she would ask questions, Michelle noted,

No, it's just the class size... I think he is very sincere, and I think that he appreciates it, I really think he does, I think he welcomes the dialog, interactions, he, I think, he just gets into the class. I think that I feel more comfortable asking after, not during office hours but after class I will ask for clarification, yeah, he is very open to it and the TA too, I feel comfortable, I mean it's a 100 kids in class so it's just like I don't want to stop class because I didn't understand something or I'm missing something you know.

Wilma did talk about some professors (not Doc) stressing the classroom hierarchy creating a gap between the teacher and the student. Wilma describes this gap as

like well I am the professor and you're the student and you are automatically wrong so just like shut up... (The professors) at least (should) respect us enough to try and answer our questions at the end. We listen to you, you can listen to us right back. There has to be like some connection there, otherwise it's like I am not going to listen to a word you say

and consequently not learn.

In the same vein as the level playing field and feeling relaxed/comfortable in the classroom, Lyndon points out that

I think when there is humor in the classroom with the teacher making you feel more relaxed, it makes the student feel that there's not a hierarchy. (The playing field is made more level.) The teacher is not up here and you're down here. I think it makes you feel on even terms because he is making fun with you not at you, he is talking at you he is talking with you, I think that humor does make the student feel more relaxed and feel the teacher is some god or goddess, it makes them feel they are both human beings on the same standard.

Steph discusses how the use of humor helped to make

a more relaxed state I guess, because if the teacher is uptight about everything, and just straight through it this and that, then you feel like you have to be worried about it at all times, but if they can joke around with it, I am more relaxed in my taking notes and I am not all like I cannot miss that one point because I am going to fail if I don't get that one question or whatever.

Humor can be introduced in the classroom by telling humorous, subject-related stories (such as Doc telling about the circumstances of FDR's death, the burial of Pullman or making Elvis an honorary drug-enforcement agent) but via visual presentation as well.

Another theory about humor, the incongruity theory, which was supported by Kant, Kierkegaard, and Aristotle, was based on the principle of setting up an expectation and delivering something with a twist. If one were to see any of Doc's diagrams which he often draws on the board, the incongruity would be obvious.

Talking about how he would draw a map of Korea, he ended up with a map which Doc stated looked a lot more like Indiana; that being said, these diagrams were definitely like no other diagram or map they had seen before—yet, they were both appreciated and effective. Wilma pointed out that

I like the pictures that he draws on the board... Yeah, it's like he is so bad it's funny, like when you know he is going to the board, there is obviously something going on that you need to pay attention to and if he like even if it is chicken scratch... It is an easy visual even if it is not quite accurate,

yet the points he wanted to make are successfully made.

Steph points out that if the teacher becomes an entertainer rather than an instructor, there will be a negative impact on the class. She then pointed out that Doc "has a nice balance (between being a teacher and entertainer)... He takes out trinkets and things that are just strange. Pictures every once in a while, just random pictures. So it's like at the beginning, he gets your attention."

In a similar vein, Michelle noted that "I don't need to be entertained; I don't need to be laughing to learn. I mean it can help." She continued that with Doc's approach "the class flew by."

iii. Humor and Discipline in the Classroom—A Ha-Xymoron?

Can humor and discipline coexist in the same classroom?

Wilma in discussing the possibility of humor in the classroom still having discipline, points out that in a sense by keeping the students focused on the class the classroom is under control as well.

The humor actually works the best when people are actually paying attention so if like you are all paying attention and everyone is like, oh, oh, I get it and then laughs, you won't be that one person that's looking around saying like why is everyone laughing, so you have to have everyone focused to get the joke.

Steph told about one of her teachers who used humor yet had a disciplined classroom.

My sociology teacher is probably the most outgoing teacher that I have right now, maybe because it is sociology and there are so many stories that you can put along with it, but like it is still a very disciplined class, it's not like she is very animated up there, and everyone in class, like there are people are still talking in the background, but like she has order to the class, so like if we start talking, it's like be quiet, and you know that she means it.

Lyndon in a pensive and agreeable moment pointed out that too much humor could negatively impact discipline.

Up to this point, humor has been considered to be a single entity; however, there are different types of humor. Are some types of humor less effective, or even not effective with respect to the higher education classroom? James St. Pierre (2001) conducted a study to see how different types of humor (such as self-disparaging and sarcastic) affect the classroom and how these effects are different for the different types. Thus I was interested in learning how my informants thought about some of these different types of humor and how they affected the classroom environment?

C. Humor

i. The Effects Determined by Different Types of Humor

With respect to types of humor and its application, Michelle points out that “you should be careful with humor, because there are different people with different senses of humor. You don’t want to say something offensive.” Wilma said in a similar vein, “If people start like poking fun of students, if it is malicious, then it’s not ok and I’m kind of like shut off and tune out. It’s like if they are going to mean, then I am not going to listen.”

In looking at a specific type humor, sarcasm, the teacher needs to be careful of its potential adverse effects in the classroom. Wilma told about one of her past teachers. “He did try to be funny one day, but he ended just calling us all stupid again, because he like opened up the lecture with a picture of a chicken, because apparently this chicken can count to five by tapping on the shapes on a playing card.” She continued to remember that he was trying to be funny, but “it didn’t work!” “I still think there should be some respect there because they’re teaching me something that is consequential to my future.”

The potential danger in using sarcasm seems consistent with the superiority theory of humor discussed in the literature section above. Sarcasm can be considered to be a condescending type of humor; Hobbes, along with Plato and Aristotle thought that humor fed on aggressive feeling resulting in this feeling of superiority. Terms such as aggressive and superiority are inconsistent with that proverbial level playing field which

was addressed above; consequently, only in rare cases would they foster a learning-conducive environment. Wilma, outspoken about sarcasm told about “Twinkie Boy!”

He called one of the kids in my class TWINKIE BOY, because he saw him eating a Twinkie the first day of school—I didn’t like it at first...I mean he never did make fun of me personally, when I saw him doing that, I kind of shrunk in the corner and I didn’t want to have that focus/attention. I’m not the type of person that wants attention all of the time, kind of do my own thing and observe others. ... I probably talked to the teacher once or twice outside of class the whole year because he did it so much.”

Yes, sarcasm is seen as a definite detriment to the learning-conducive environment. Wilma above described that the teacher-student gap is increased by emphasizing the classroom hierarchy. Students will be very concerned about staying under the radar, for if one is noticed or called on, the odds of being picked on increase as well. It would seem that if a student is concerned about NOT making eye contact with the instructor, his/her focus will not totally be on the lecture material at hand.

ii. Humor and Spontaneity

Buckman (2010, p. 7) wrote that classroom humor needs to be both spontaneous and random. Boverie (1990, p. 85) stresses that in order to effectively use humor in the classroom will require planning-but how much planning—wouldn’t too much planning erode any spontaneity?

What do the interviewees think about spontaneity? The interviewees believed that if humor seems too scripted, it will seem artificial and deter the relaxed nature of the learning-conducive learning environment; spontaneity fosters this learning environment.

On one occasion, Wilma was able to see the lecture notes of one of her professors. She noted, “They were actually paragraphs, they were fully written paragraphs and he

will use it when he is trying to read a quote but otherwise they are so old, because you can really tell that they are old.” She noted that while the jokes/aka humor were written down, they felt spontaneous and worked well.

When asked if Doc was spontaneous, Wilma responded “I think some of his notes are written because from sitting in the front, I can kind of see his lecture notes and they are written all over, but it does feel spontaneous.”

Michelle also had a teacher who wrote his jokes in his lecture notes. “The idea that he really writes it in his notes, and grades it (a joke) if it works or if it needs updating.” Nevertheless, “It seemed spontaneous...it didn’t seem scripted. Like I said, none of us picked up that it was scripted, until his T.A. told us.” (Is a lesson here to NOT trust the TA?)

Is there another source of spontaneous humor in the classroom other than the teacher?

It seems that humor may manifest itself from students. Wilma describes that

Like today in the debate, we were debating something with age and I asked the other group like are you even legal and then a kid that I usually have the quips with responded are you even legal, so that was kind of what she was picking on me for because it was the random comments, she wasn’t being malicious it’s just that everyone just laughed because this kid and I were bantering back and forth across the class room.

Michelle continued that thought about an idea that there are certain students in her classes who almost have a natural reflex to be “funny” (aka humor) when the class gets too slow-moving.

Other than kinds of humor and timing, need humor always be applicable or germane to the subject at hand?

iii. Relevance of Humor (What's So Funny about Being Relevant—Or Can It Be Relevant If It's Not Relevant)

How effective would humor in the classroom be if it was not related to the subject matter at hand? Would an off-subject (not off-color), short humorous discussion at the beginning of class be acceptable? Could comments/stories off task be distracting during the class itself?

Wilma squarely votes for relevance in the humor when she proclaims,

I guess for me the most effective humor is when the joke is about the material itself, like Doc will like start on a random tangent about some person and make it funny. But then you remember it because it is about an actual history topic it's not like he goes off and says a random joke about birds or something in the middle of history class. So I mean if you use completely irrelevant humor then people are not going to be paying attention because they are going to be thinking about the irrelevant humor and not pay any attention to the topic you are presenting but if it is a funny quip about some historical figure or some pun about a certain physiological process in biology and then that's going to make more sense and people are going to remember it because it's what they are actually doing it's not taking their mind and putting it in a different direction, it is looking at the same material from a different angle.

Similarly, Lyndon states,

I think humor based on the subject matter is good...I don't think that humor outside the subject matter all the time, I mean maybe once here or there, but you don't want a teacher who going to tell jokes about math when you're in history, or history while you're in math..(Irrelevant humor) I think ...takes away from the learning environment.

Wilma says that if the subject did not lend itself to humor, an interesting fact would be the next best thing.

You would probably focus more on interesting things because I know in my biology class, we read the book, and she tells us what is in the book, but then she

also pulls other things that are interesting like that are relevant so we pay attention and then it is kind of cool to see why everything fits together and we all pay attention.

Michelle told about a teacher she had who would have people tell personal stories; these were stories that were totally NOT related to the material at hand. She considered these stories to be distractions. Regarding Doc's class, Michelle continues remembering the circumstances of FDR's death. (Doc said that FDR died while getting his picture painted for his mistress' mother.)

I think it helps me yeah because it helps to build connections and it helps me remember but again, you can't be so extraneous and in depth to spend six pages talking about FDR's affairs...I had a sociology professor, and still to this day I remember him, it was so irrelevant like I mean part of my dislike is sociology, when people say sociology I grunt just cause it was bad, because he was so off topic and it felt like such a waste of my time. That even now that I know that he is not the discipline, I have it like, I have such a reaction!

While considering irrelevance, Steph talked about one of her teachers who, while attempting to be funny, really wasn't. In further discussing this instructor,

I don't know if he had a poor sense of humor, or was really trying hard, but he made a joke one day about how he loves his children, and then he followed it up with not in a sexual way. And it caught everybody off guard, and we were all like that is not a joke.

Such an attempt at humor can not only disrupt that day's class, it can damage the learning-conducive environment for the rest of the term.

The informants believed that being relevant is important to the learning-conducive environment, but if a teacher MUST stray, stay as close to topic as possible and return as soon as possible.

In looking at the informants in this study, there ended up being four females and one male, all Caucasians; what role might gender play in the use of humor?

iv. Gender and Humor

In recollecting the survey results, while the study by St. Pierre (2001) was one of the few studies that considered gender regarding the use of humor in the classroom, St. Pierre's (2001) findings supported previous studies that showed that females responded more favorably toward the use of self-disparaging humor by their instructors, regardless of gender, than to humor that disparages others. Additionally, the appeal of a female instructor to females was enhanced by the use of self-disparaging humor but decreased by the use of others-disparaging humor. On the other hand, male students had no preference regarding a teacher's humor.

Another study (Garner, 2006) concluded that while there were no significant results based on gender, which seemed to reflect what I had found in other studies. This finding matched the opinions of my informant domain both via conversation and via their filling out the survey.

There was one interesting topic with respect to gender that was discussed during the interview. Michelle pointed out that Doc's warm-up conversations with the class often involved the Bears and Packers. "Football, it seems so sexist and I am not from Wisconsin." She felt that talking sports could very well alienate 50% or more (females?) of the class. In other words, Doc's ICE BREAKER could at times be an ICE MAKER.

Lyndon when considering gender stated “I think through my experiences, my male teachers have been better overall. I have had better experiences with male teachers than female teachers.” In continuing back to his high school days, he noted that he had had two female teachers who just didn’t care much about their classes.

It seemed like with male teachers they used humor more. The female teachers just wanted to teach...maybe they will have humor here or there kind of but I think that the male teachers have that sense humor more often in, which keeps me focused more, brings my attention back . But I have also had male teachers that who aren’t very good either so I don’t want to say it’s because of gender, but I want to say that I think that male teachers have that sense of humor more which helps them keep their students more attentive.

Overall, gender, race and age were deemed non-factors in teacher efficacy by the respondents in the surveys. While gender was discussed a little in the interviews by one informant who felt alienated by the instructor’s examples, other than that, the discussions themselves seemed to have little or no bearing on the informant’s view of teacher effectiveness.

v. Humor is not a Panacea!

Stambor (2006) quotes “...Berk...suggests that to be effective, comedy (humor) must complement—and not distract from—course material. Concepts that would get in the way of being “complementary” could be lack of relevance or no spontaneity—both topics covered above. Can there be too much humor in the classroom? Can a classroom be a learning-conducive environment without (any obvious) humor?

Too Much Humor?

Stambor also writes that “Humor can be overdone to the point that students are so busy awaiting the next gag that they miss the teacher’s message.” (Stambor, 2006, p64)

Lyndon concurred when he stated ” I think with too much humor it would bring, I think it would bring the ethos of the teacher down, his credibility, I think his credibility it would also go down with that because if he is not going to teach seriously and just tell jokes, what’s the point of listening, how do you know that he is being serious about what he is actually saying...You need to be serious, you need to crack down when you need to get going on stuff and when you see a chance for a quick little thing go ahead and add it as long as it is not all the time

Steph was quoted before that if too much humor was involved in the classroom, where the teacher seems to be trying to be more of an entertainer and less of an instructor, this would be detrimental the classroom setting.

Humor Works---But It Won’t Solve Everything

While an effective tool for teaching, humor is not the panacea—it does not solve all problems—it is one of the arrows in the teacher’s quiver for being on target in his/her profession. Again, the informants pointed out that there are limitations and considerations when it comes to using humor; concepts such as over-use, not being relevant or spontaneous, being mean-spirited may make the use of humor detrimental to the efficacy of the teacher. Lundberg (2002, p.11) points out that, “You may need to guide students in learning that there are boundaries with humor as there are with anything else.”

While more “conclusions” are discussed in the next chapter, the interviews did indeed point out their belief in the importance of humor helping create a learning-conducive environment and improve retention of material—all in all, helping an

instructor become more effective in his/her classroom. There was a consensus that a classroom setting utilizing humor was preferable and most efficient.

It was noted before that humor was considered by the informants in the interviews to be a trait associated with an efficacious instructor helping relieve stress, and making the students feel comfortable enough to ask questions, and in general creating a learning-conducive environment.

At the same time, the surveys showed humor to play a role but not a very important role in teacher efficacy; however, other than knowledge of the classroom subject matter, having an environment conducive to learning and student interaction/answering questions were ranked highest. Then, remembering that humor was shown by extant literature to help create such a learning-conducive environment and reduce stress, the inferences one could draw from both methods are consistent.

CHAPTER 5 The Lesson—There Does Seem to be a Link between Laughing and Learning

Everyone has had college instructors whom they thought were excellent and those who were not. I began to wonder what attributes might have made the difference between these groups. During this reflection, the topic of humor came to the forefront.

Humor has been important to me in part being one of the ways I approach life in general and something I “used” as a higher education and secondary school teacher as well as a salesperson. While I did feel humor was an important tool in the teacher’s proverbial toolbox, I began to wonder what actual connection might there be between the efficacy of an instructor and the use of humor in the classroom.

Consequently, I found myself setting course to study this idea which transformed into my research question “What role does humor in the higher education classroom play in student-perceived instructor effectiveness?”

I chose a mixed methods (qualitative and quantitative) approach to acquiring data in order to better hear the voices of the students and be able to discuss their classroom experiences in their context with respect to what humor is, what determines an effective instructor and so on. An entry-level history class (led by a college instructor known for his sense of humor) at a major Midwestern university was selected as the domain for my study.

A number of students were given a survey on instructor effectiveness; some of the survey respondents were chosen for a series of three, 30-45 minute interviews to discuss the research question topic, i.e., the role humor plays in the higher education classroom. The goal was to hear what students actually had to say about the importance of humor in their classrooms. While the use of a survey in my study may seem to be anti-

qualitative, I felt it was the best approach to acquire personal data about the respondents, upon which I would be able to base my selection of the most diverse sub-domain (for the interviews) possible as well as being able to obtain their own definition of the term humor to say nothing about acquiring a context for the classroom.

In reviewing the extant literature, it was found that many books and articles written about humor and education were typically anecdotal and prescriptive in nature with little or no research backing. Examples of non-study thoughts are Cornett (1986), Lundberg (2002) and Schatz (2006).

Cornett (1986) and Lundberg (2002) both consider that humor plays an important role in providing a learning environment due in part to the minimizing or elimination of stress in the classroom. Such an atmosphere was found by all of the informants (in the surveys and the interviews) to be a key reason for humor's utilization by teachers.

Similarly, Shatz (2006) purports that humor helps to heighten and maintain student interest and improve both the comprehension and retention of the concept by having the proverbial "break in the action." This pause was noted by Wilma when she remarked that by breaking up the information with something humorous thrown in, learning and interest were increased, or as Wilma said it's "like OH, click on your brain it's time to learn!" The interviewees all felt this mental break was key to helping them stay focused and not zoning out.

I also determined that a large number of studies that did exist were concerned with K-12 school settings. Additionally I could not find any of these studies that actually listened to the voice of the student; rather they acquired data via surveys and pre-class

and post-class exams, testing for the change for the control groups in knowledge retention.

This (no-student-voice) approach to acquiring information/data was problematic to me for a number of reasons. While all in the domain were asked about humor, in a sense they were each being asked different questions due to the lack of a singular definition of the concept, “humor,” which could be attributed to the paradigm of a quantitative study. My research led me to the idea that humor nearly defies a restrictive, singular definition similar to asking a number people about how well-seasoned a food dish was or should be.

In short, everyone would have their own opinion/definition. I think this can be extended to the idea of humor as everyone has their own sense of humor, much like everyone has their own sense of taste; in a way, humor might be viewed as the “sixth sense.” (This is no way alluding to the movie “The Sixth Sense” by M. Night Shyamalan where a boy could see “dead people” that being said, I know there are times when instructors look out at their classrooms and see “dead people!” My interest, however, is to see why some professors only have classes of active, participating “live” students.)

Returning from this tangential path, the approach of using pre- and post-tests to determine learning might miss the mark in testing the effect of humor on learning and retention of information. The actual timing of the humorous doses in the class might actually hurt learning inadvertently; for example, a fact to be queried may fall right immediately after a planned humorous occurrence and in a sense not be learned due to the distraction caused by finding itself in the wash of a joke or quip.

The results of the survey and interviews aligned with the extant literature, namely that humor did indeed play an important role in the efficacy of their instructors by creating this learning-conducive environment, where the atmosphere was less stressful, where questions could be asked without fear, and information would be better and longer retained.

The Pedde (1996) study, which helped point me in the direction I chose to take, showed how humor can help create a caring classroom which better engaged the students and ultimately improving the learning process. The student survey which I conducted resulted in this idea of a learning environment coming second in the rankings to Knowledge of the Subject Matter. The latter was discussed as probably the most important trait of an efficacious instructor.

Along the same lines, Aboudan (2009) showed the utility of humor in creating this learning atmosphere ultimately having a positive effect on student learning. Similarly, Kaplan and Pascoe (1977) found that subject matter retention was significantly improved by having viewed a lecture with humorous examples illustrating the concepts.

While humor was consistently in the middle of the pack in ways of ranking attributes, the interviews showed a higher level of importance. Steph linked humor, stress reduction and learning when she pointed out that if she is more relaxed in a class she will be able to retain the information longer. Lyndon continued with that thought noting that “I think if a teacher provides a nice environment for learning, it helps the student learn the subject matter better.”

Of note is that while my analysis did mesh well with the extant literature, my efforts added to it as well in a number of areas. First, my research listened to the voice of

the higher education student. Listening to the voice of any student was nearly non-existent in the studies which I found; when student voice was heard in those few cases, it was in the K-12 arena.

My efforts also focused on the concept of humor and teacher effectiveness through the lens of the student. No studies considered the student opinion in what makes an effective instructor, even though the students are typically surveyed at the end of a term to evaluate their instructors. In this study, rather than using before-and-after testing as utilized to a large extent in the studies which I cited, students were given the chance to tell what **THEY** believed constituted an efficacious teacher. This is a much different approach to the semester-end surveys where the desired traits/attributes were mainly pre-defined and student responses are compared to these desired traits/attributes.

My discussions surfaced the link between the concepts of a “favorite teacher” and an efficient teacher which I had not seen before. The extant literature addressed the concept of a favorite teacher as one whose class was enjoyable, but did not link being a favorite teacher to being an efficacious teacher.

Partly due to the tenets of quantitative studies, terms are singularly defined or left undefined; yet, many findings of note were determined by such studies. My work incorporating a qualitative approach, made the student view of the various concepts, including but not limited to the definition of humor, visible to the reader. Additionally, my qualitative efforts in tandem with the quantitative works provided a more complete picture of the higher education (teacher-based, lecture-type classroom.)

Leveling the playing field by the use of humor which in turn made a more learning-conducive environment had not been previously presented. This was so important to one informant (Wilma) who said she would not listen if she felt she were being looked down by an instructor, in which cases a many-times seen teacher-student hierarchy was being applied. In her mind, humor helped to remove this teacher/student tension and aid in learning.

Finally as an offshoot of my efforts, I heard about the NON-efficacious teachers and their methods or lack thereof, again through the eyes of the student experiencing such classroom environments. This in turn motivated me to consider higher education instructors and possible ways to address these shortcomings by way of seminars, in-service classes and the like, potentially using humor as a way to help make a more learning-conducive environment.

Interpretation of Findings

The purpose of this section is to interpret the findings from my research. Having shown how my findings related to the extant literature in the previous section, I will continue with this interpretation by building a theory based on my findings and providing a possible application of concepts arising from the research.

Build a Theory

The first task is to build a theory based on the information found in this document. My theory is that the use of humor can have a positive effect on how students perceive the effectiveness of their instructors.

All of my discussions with my informants lead me to the same place that the best, most effective learning-conducive environment involved an instructor using humor of some sort and in some carefully-dosed amount (i.e., not too much of the proverbial good thing) but, first of all, is humor required for learning?

The consensus (and a unanimous one at that) of my informants was that one can indeed learn in a classroom without humor; that being said, such classes were also described as potentially “painful,” “more work,” and portrayed with other negative descriptions of the classroom environment. Such humorless classrooms were deemed by this group as not resulting in the learning and information retention levels as high as a class with humor.

Returning to my research question, “What role does humor in the higher education classroom play in student-perceived instructor effectiveness?” I find myself focusing on the phrase “student-perceived instructor effectiveness.” As all of the comments in this paper (unless clearly noted as coming from me) came from my informants, one should focus, then, on the meaning of “effectiveness.”

It is difficult to believe that a classroom referred to as “painful” or requiring “more work” would be associated with the concept effective. I would suggest then, that a classroom **WITHOUT** humor is not effective or is ineffective; but how does the use of humor provide this effectiveness?

Throughout the interviews, I heard from my informants a number of ways that humor helps the classroom. Humor helps make the student more engaged during the entire class session, which in turn motivates the student to be involved and stay involved. By being motivated and involved, the mind of the student will stay better focused on the subject material at hand. Consequently, by staying focused the student will learn more and retain the material longer.

The use of humor will also provide the environment where the student will feel comfortable enough to ask questions; even focused students at times will need clarification and explanation of the material. Asking questions will provide the student with a more complete understanding, and consequently better learning of the material. Furthermore, if the student is fully engaged in the class, they will want to attend class regardless of whether roll is taken or not.

Remembering that all of the informants, upon reflecting the utility of humor in the classroom, discussed the concepts just described and how they were put to use by their favorite, and most efficacious teachers, one could view these concepts as traits of an effective classroom. I would propose that based on the opinions of my informants, one could make the statement that humor highly increases the probability of an effective classroom. In other words, humor plays a very important role in the higher education classroom in student-perceived instructor effectiveness.

Implications from the Study

An obvious take-away is that humor does indeed help improve the efficacy of the higher education instructor. If one were to (arguably) consider this to be factual, how could one apply such a fact? I would note that while not a focus of my interviews, an

emerging theme was that some of the instructors that were discussed, (kindly offered) left much to be desired.

In considering the field of education in general, teachers must be very well-prepared via pre-determined and defined certification processes before they are permitted to teach in K-12 schools; that is typically not the case in higher education. The only prerequisite to be an instructor in higher education is (supposed) knowledge of the subject matter to be taught and an advanced degree in the particular discipline.

In hearing throughout the interviews and elsewhere of “painful,” humor-less classes, of classes where the lights were turned out and the instructor reads their powerpoints to the students who are already in possession of the documents and are there only because attendance will be taken, even as a former educator, I feel embarrassed. When we subject our higher education students to intelligent instructors who do not have a mastery of the classroom’s predominant language where the students have more difficulty understanding the instructor than the material, I am saddened. Hearing of instances where students are belittled by egotistical instructors with a bent for the sarcastic, I am disappointed. Upon considering that the students could learn more and actually enjoy a class at the same time, but are not presented with such an option, what can be done? The institution(s) of higher learning need to recognize this as the problem that it is and address it, perhaps by developing required professional development classes for faculty including courses in pedagogy in all graduate degree programs to improve the pedagogy in their classrooms (utilizing humor as a tool, naturally), and conducting instructor evaluations and classroom observations of all prospective instructors and current faculty in action.

Admitting that all of the items on the list (of possible, higher education shortcomings) above are not all repairable or at least addressable by me, I do think some things could be done. In business, one tries to keep offering better products and services through what is called “continuous improvement.” Such efforts result from a number of steps and processes, one being an ongoing assessment of an offering to keep making the product or service better.

Consequently, I would like to see courses, in-services, on-line offerings, call them what you will, to help the higher education instructor hone his/her skills. I have thought of this to the extent that, tongue-in-cheek, I’ve come up with two program names:

LAphdR™ (teaching humor/laughter to PhDs or higher education instructors),

and

HUMORx™ (curing the “painful” classroom with humor)

Admittedly, the programs about which I write may have humor-centered titles, based in part on my feelings (and those of my informants as well) of the important role that humor plays in any classroom, such programs could also cover topics as “leave the lights on and talk WITH your students, not TO them.” Such a “program” could be conducted by the universities and colleges themselves as part of a pre-term, pre-requisite to teaching via in-sessions (a term arguably over-used in secondary education) via face-to-face or online methods.

The American Association of University Professors relates teacher evaluation to the measurement of the effectiveness of instruction. The typical approach, and as seen in

many of the studies from the extant literature, is judging student learning. It should be noted that the difficulty with measuring student learning is that there are many more factors in this learning process than just the efforts of the teacher taking part in student learning. In addition, “measures of ‘beforeandafter’ (sic) learning are difficult to find, control or compare.” (AAUP 2006, p. 2).

Difficulties notwithstanding, measurement of a teacher’s performance (including but not limited to classroom performance, advising and interaction with the students) ultimately rests in larger part on the student voice. This student viewpoint becomes more of an important means of measurement as there are fewer but still a “variety of ways are available to gather student opinion, ranging from informal questioning of individual students about details of a specific course to campus-wide questionnaires.” AAUP (2006, p. 3)

Mission Accomplished?

This section is often called the “limitations of the study” but I feel that while there is always room for improvement, all in all, the results were more than satisfactory. It was a conscious decision from the beginning to choose a small number of people to interview; that being said, it would have been desirable to have more respondents to the survey to perhaps obtain a larger class perspective. However in hindsight, I don’t consider my findings to be diminished in any way by the small survey response.

The results from choosing a qualitative approach and using interviews as the main “data collection tool” with ancillary data being gathered via a separate survey met and/or exceeded my goals of this research. As noted previously, by listening to the voice of the student the relative importance of a number of attributes were different than those

obtained from the survey. If only survey results had been used, I would have inferred that Subject Matter was the most important trait for an effective classroom. On the other hand, the interviews showed that Humor (lower ranked) was at least equally important as Subject Matter. Obtaining such new details from the use of interviews seems to justify my choice of using a qualitative approach for gathering data.

The voice of the student also provided a description of what the students felt constituted an efficacious teacher. This extended to the linkage between the concept of a “favorite” teacher and an effective teacher.

This study demonstrated through the voice of the student the importance of humor in the higher education classroom regarding learning environment and retention of knowledge. The student perception of what constituted instructor efficacy was also heard. The extant literature as noted before did not consider this perception, did not focus on higher education and the teacher-centric, large classroom, lecture environment which remains in prevalent use in this level.

The concept of leveling the playing field by the use of humor in turn providing a more learning-conducive environment had not been presented heretofore. Finally considering the antithesis of the efficacious instructor, the informants spoke at length about those instructors who they considered to need help. This in turn motivated me to consider what can be done to help the higher education instructor.

Suggestions for Future Research

In considering suggestions for future research, research should be conducted to determine if the importance of humor differs across age, gender and racial categories. My older informant Michelle did have a more mature, driven outlook with respect to the

classroom. As noted above, some topics/comments found humorous by one age group may very well be deemed old (or too young), weird or just not funny to others; in what areas would these discrepancies be found—sports, cars, music (a good bet here), entertainment in general or where?

Would gender demonstrate differing viewpoints on humor's role? Admittedly, some topics of discussion may be considered off limits depending on the class demographics with respect to gender; what might these areas be and should an instructor enter the Sargasso Sea of sunken, potentially tasteless jokes and comments how would they be received?

In looking at race, we should explore to what degree might background and context hinder or enhance the effectiveness of humor in the classroom? Again, similar to gender, some areas might be considered verboten, but how would class demographics change this? For example, if a class consisted of a single race, would some jokes be deemed acceptable for this class but not in a mixed-race class? Naturally, this begs the question as to why even use such a type of humor for one group and not another in the classroom? What about religion?

Another area of possible research would be the effect of the home environment on the importance of humor. Would a person from a home with an environment with humor be more or less affected by humor in the classroom? How would a person from a more serious home consider humor's role in the classroom? Might the student be distracted by a light-hearted environment? The same ideas could be extended to looking at "humorous" versus more "serious" students.

By design, this study has focused from the beginning on the teacher-centric, lecture-based large classroom. This raises an important question, how would humor affect less teacher-centric environments? Would a more interactive instructional setting (which on-line instruction would be a subset) generate a differential impact with the use of humor? How would class size be a factor in the potential success of humor?

Across all these variations we must ask to what degree class size might be a factor. Yet another important area of investigation might be to determine if students from differing disciplines had different views and opinions on humor. While I had hoped to see obvious differences in my efforts, I found none. However, how might engineers and business majors be similar? How different? Would nursing and pre-med students be more similar than different? Would a graduate student majoring in law be that different from a student in law enforcement?

Finally, a topic of particular interest for further research would be looking for what group of students, if any, believes that humor does NOT play an important role in the classroom. While personally considering such opinions to be anomalies, what might be the common traits from such a rebel group? Clearly we have a large future agenda for investigating the role of humor in the higher education classroom.

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Appendix A

Individual Definitions of Humor

STEPH

“Humor to me is the ability to make someone laugh, or to laugh at oneself. It’s a way to relax and just have a good time while making jokes about something.”

MICHELLE

“Humor is the ability to look at events in alternate manner that causes some enjoyment and possibly laughter to either the individual speaking/acting or the audience (the students). It can be applied to subject matter, individuals or events.”

LYNDON

“Humor is making someone laugh in your own way without offending someone or hurting someone’s feelings.”

MARCIA

“Humor is the ability to laugh and make jokes about a variety of subjects and situations. It’s a connection made regardless of age, race, or cultural background.”

WILMA

“Humor is being able to make someone laugh and bring a liveliness to conversations that make topic interesting to the audience.”

PAULA

“Being funny and being able to joke around and have fun.”

ROSE

“Humor is the ability of a person to incorporate jokes or be amusing in any given setting.”

WINNIE

“Humor is applying the material to a more casual structure. If a professor’s jokes are intellectually based on the subject area, I am more likely to learn.”

JEAN

“Humor is when someone is comical and acts lightheartedly.”

Appendix B

Spring Semester, 2012

To Students of (Instructor, Class, Date/Time)_____

My name is Steve Halula, stephen.halula@marquette.edu, a doctorate student at Marquette University. I am doing a qualitative study on what attributes students feel make an instructor effective in the classroom.

My study consists of an initial survey found below, three 30-45 minute follow-up interviews with selected respondents as well as three classroom observations.

If you respond to the survey below by completing this survey and providing your contact information, you will be eligible for a drawing for a Kindle Fire. Additionally, if you are involved in the follow-up interviews you will also be eligible for a separate drawing for a Kindle Fire.

For each of these activities:

- a. Your real name will not be used in the written report.
- b. All materials, such as completed surveys, transcription notes, as well as observation and field notes will be kept secured until they are destroyed.
- c. Your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw at any point in this study without any penalty to you.

By responding to this email, you grant permission for me to use your completed survey if selected to be interviewed and for this interview to be audio-taped. Please email me your completed survey to my email address, stephen.halula@marquette.edu.

If you have any questions, please email me at stephen.halula@marquette.edu or call my cell phone (414.745.4438).

Thank you.

Steve Halula

SURVEY

DATE _____

ON A SCALE FROM 1 (lowest or least important) to 5 (highest or most important)
PLEASE RATE THE IMPORTANCE EACH OF THE FOLLOWING TEACHER
TRAITS/ATTRIBUTES/QUALIFICATIONS FOR TEACHER EFFECTIVENESS FOR

Teacher Age _____

Teacher Race _____

Teacher Gender _____

Teacher Possesses Advanced Degree _____

Discipline/Classroom Management _____

Knowledge of the Subject Material _____

Sense of Humor _____

Handout Materials (Amount/Quality) _____

Answering Questions/Interaction with Students _____

Test Construction _____

Grading _____

Homework Assignments (Number/Difficulty) _____

Difficulty of Classroom Material _____

A "Fun" Classroom _____

Environment Conducive for Learning _____

Of all the topics above, please choose (ranking these from MOST to LEAST important) the top five attributes of an effective teacher:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

Would you be agreeable to be interviewed approximately three times for an average of 30-45 minutes per interview? _____

NAME _____

EMAIL ADDRESS _____

GENDER _____

AGE _____

MAJOR _____

RACE _____

GPA _____

How would you define the term "humor" in a sentence or two?
